

*Artists of The Constructivist Theatre*  
*Alexandra Exter and Liubov Popova*





THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

MO055906NC

ARTISTS OF THE CONSTRUCTIVIST THEATRE:

ALEXANDRA EXTER AND LIUBOV POPOVA

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO:

THE FACULTY OF HISTORY OF ART AND DESIGN & COMPLEMENTARY STUDIES

AND

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE

FACULTY OF FINE ART

DEPARTMENT OF PRINTMAKING & JOINT COURSE

BY

ANNEMARIE REID

MARCH 1990



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ILLUSTRATIONS	4
INTRODUCTION	7
Chapter:	
I     Historical Background : Painting, Theatre and Constructivism Exter and Popova's Influences	9
II     Alexandra Exter	37
III    Liubov Popova	61
IV     Diversions and Similarities : A Comparison of Exter and Popova	85
CONCLUSION	100
BIBLIOGRPAHY	104



## ILLUSTRATIONS

No.	Page
1. <u>Private of the First Division</u> by Kasimir Malevich	16
2. <u>Sketch; Backcloth for Victory Over the Sun.</u>	19
<u>Act I, Scene II</u> by Kasimir Malevich	
3. <u>Sketch; Backcloth for Victory Over the Sun,</u>	19
<u>Act II, Scene VI</u> by Kasimir Malevich	
4. <u>Black Square</u> by Kasimir Malevich	19
5. <u>Costumes Designs for Victory Over the Sun</u>	22
by Kasimir Malevich	
6. <u>Tower or Monument to The Third International</u>	27
by Vladimir Tatlin	
7. <u>Selection of Materials: Iron, Stucco, Glass, Asphalt</u>	27
by Vladimir Tatlin	
8. <u>Circular Forms</u> by Alexander Rochenko	30
9. <u>Dynamic Construction</u> by Alexandra Exter	32
10. <u>Dynamic Constructions</u> by Liubov Popova	32
11. <u>Photograph of Alexandra Exter in her Paris</u>	33
Studio 1920's	38
12. <u>Design for a Constructivist Stage Set</u> by A. Exter	43
13. <u>Sketch: Famira's Costume</u> by A. Exter	43
14. <u>Models for Sets of Famira Kifared and Salome</u>	44
15. <u>A Scene from Famira Kifared</u>	49
16. <u>Sketch: Salome's Costume</u> by A. Exter	52
17. <u>Costume Designs for Salome</u> by A. Exter	53



## ILLUSTRATIONS

Continued

No.		Page
18.	<u>Costume and Set Designs for Romeo and Juliet</u> by A. Exter	57
19.	<u>Scene from Romeo and Juliet</u>	58
20.	<u>Photograph of Liubov Popova</u>	62
21.	<u>Study of Nude</u> by L. Popova	64
22.	<u>Dynamic Composition</u> by L. Popova	64
23.	<u>Philosopher</u> by L. Popova	66
24.	<u>Pictorial Architectonic</u> by L. Popova	71
25.	<u>Arthitectonic Painting</u> by L. Popova	71
26.	<u>Untitled</u> by L. Popova	74
27.	<u>Rehearsal for The Magnanimous Cuckold</u>	77
28.	<u>Photomontage for the Earth in Turmoil</u> by L. Popova	80
29.	<u>Costume Design for Actor No. 2, The Magnanimous Cuckold</u> by L. Popova	89
30.	<u>Design for Man's Clothing</u> by A. Exter	90
31.	<u>Design for the Sets of The Storm</u> by The Stenbergs	97
32.	<u>Still from Atelia</u>	97



## INTRODUCTION

For Russian artists of the early twentieth century, the theatre possessed a vast, magnetic force and had many advantages over other forms of art. The history of soviet design had progressed in such a way that the theatre was one of the practical fields in which the pioneers of Soviet art were able to create new work; to 'construct' their art. It provided the painter with a creative stimulus. The new theatre was tangible. The objects and costumes in the theatre were material and tactile. The Russian theatre of the 1920's was evident of the resolution of the problems of the material environment. At the same time, it had aspirations to become a behaviour model for man under varying conditions. The theatre was synthetic, structured on a combination of the visual and the verbal, the static and the dynamic, the graphic and the spatial. Therefore it was not surprising to see how important the modern Russian theatre became to the Constructivist painters, Alexandra Exter and Liubov Popova, the aim of this essay is to present the progression of their non-objective painting into the sculptural reality of the stage production.

Constructivism and the Soviet theatre is a subject on which there is extensive material and in a sense it deserves a separate study. Constructivism affected not only the 'decorative' aspect of theatre, transforming the stage into a fully three dimensional experience but also the dramatic text, the musical accompaniment and the actor. The work of Alexandra Exter was of major importance in the development of the new conception of space as a



dynamic mechanism. It was fortunate that Exter, should have returned to Russia from Paris in 1914, and that she should have begun to work with Tairov at his chamber theatre, the "Kamerny". Exter and Popova were members of a small group of the Russian Avant-garde, who were able to transcend the confines of the pictorial surface and to organise forms in their inter-action with space.

The historical background traces the development of both fields, painting and the theatre. It investigates Exter's and Popova's contemporaries and the most significant movements of the period. The theories and practices of Malevich, Tatlin and Rodchenko are discussed in relation to their influence on Exter and Popova.

This leads to a concentration on the individual artists, Exter (Chapter Two) and Popova (Chapter Three) respectively. Both artists are examined in their approach to their painting and its progression into their creations for the stage. Each artist is reviewed in the context of her education, travels, home and foreign influences, but above all in her working relationship with the director.

In Exter's case, the movement of her painting (two dimensional) work into the sculptural design for the theatre occurs in her set of costumes designing for the "Kamerny Theatre" of Tairov. Popova's parallel development is presented in the context of her close association with Meyerhold.

The final area of study is concerned with the differences between Exter and Popova. Showing that although they both belonged to the area of 'Constructivist/Productivist' designers, their work in many ways was as diverse as it was similar in character.



## CHAPTER I

The concept of a realistic theatrical decor arrived with the use of a painter, rather than the traditional artisan, to paint sets. During the 1880's, the Imperial stage had cast a shadow of uninspiring conventions on Russian stage design, but by the 1890's the Imperial theatres could no longer ignore the private troupe of the Russian railway tycoon and patron of the arts, Savva Mamontov. He surrounded himself with the most progressive painters, composers, architects, writers and actors of the time. This group aimed to create a New Russian Culture and in 1863, two years after the emancipation of the serfs, they proclaimed their succession from the Academy of Art, rejecting the uninspiring classicism of the St. Petersburg Academy. Their work travelled in exhibitions held throughout Russia; the aim was to bring art to the people; these exhibitions providing them with their title "The Wanderers". Mamontov set up the Wanderers' colony at his estate at Abramstevo, the group organised communal activities. Sunday evening reading sessions were taken from the classics being gradually developed into mimed pageants and even further into complete theatrical productions.

The painter Victor Vasnetov, one of the group, found himself painting theatre decor, despite the fact that he had virtually no idea how to approach the task.

By the 1890's, The Imperial theatres could no longer ignore Mamontov's revolutionary use of professional painters to paint



decor and also began replacing the traditional craftsmen/stage designer with artists. The back cloth had once been the decorative background to the acting, it was now transformed into an integral part of the production. This caused a revolution in the idea of theatre. The production began to be viewed as a whole and the actor often had to subordinate his performance to the other elements; decor, costume, gesture, music and language. Subsequently, a synthesis emerged, a dramatic unity.

Despite these significant developments from the 1880's onwards the Russian theatre, along with its European counterpoint, failed to represent an effective synthesis of the variety of art forms. A co-ordinator was required, so that the theatre could realize this synthesis. The conflict between, the producer, the artist, the musician and the actor had to be removed.

Alexander Tairov (1885-1950) and Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874-1940) were amongst the great producers of the Avant-garde period but are of particular interest when focussing on the work of Exter and Popova. For it was the working relationship between Tairov and Exter and Meyerhold and Popova respectively, that resulted in their combined realization of the "Theatrical Synthesis", this in turn influenced stage design in a most decisive way. Meyerhold and his followers understood that in the theatre words are merely patterns on the canvas of movements.<sup>1</sup> However the true development towards Russian Constructivist stage design in the pre-revolutionary years, the forerunners to Exter and Popova, took place in theatrical experiments just outside Meyerhold's sphere,



especially in the productions of the folk drama *The Emperor Maximilian and his Disobedient Son Adolf* (1911) and the Futurist Opera *Victory over the Sun* (1913). Both were pieces produced by the Union of Youth Organization in St. Petersburg. The visual significance of the productions lay in the hands of their painters/designers. Fundamentally, there was no real common ground between the straight forward narrative of *The Emperor* which was designed by Tatlin, and the somewhat "Transrational" format of Malevich's *Victory over the Sun*, but both spectacles innovated new approaches to stage decor, or more appropriately titled, stage construction.

In many ways, much of the non-objective art of Exter and Popova in the early 1920's can be seen as originating from the pioneering work of Malevich in two-dimensions, from Tatlin in three dimensions and from the influence of their innovations on the younger artists, Exter and Popova, through their friendship, teachings and exhibitions.

From 1910 onwards Russian Theatrical innovators began to reject all literature, seeing action without words as appealing because it made possible the justification of the autonomy and intrinsic value of theatrical art, its full independence from literature. A group of contemporary poets, specifically Velimir Kholodnikov and Vladimir Mayakovsky, declared themselves as The Russian Futurists, they aimed to create a theatre completely without precedent, rejecting current theatrical practice. Authoritative figures such as Stanislavsky and his naturalist theatre, were of no consequence as far as the Futurists were concerned. They also paid little attention to the innovations of Meyerhold or Tairov.



Although, there had been a recent Russian tradition of artists working for the theatre, beginning with the older generation of 'World of Art' artists like Bakst and Benois Goncharova, Tatlin and Malevich from Exter's generation had also executed theatrical designs. Still, Exter's interest in the theatre was more likely first stimulated by her contacts with the Italian Futurists, particularly Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Futurism's founder whom she knew personally. Marinetti's first futurist manifesto was published in 1909. He believed that the modern age discovered its own beauty in the lines and speed of the motor car, it was no longer possible to unite the new beauty with the more static and complacent achievements of the Renaissance. He published a manifesto, *the Variety Theatre*, in the Italian Futurist Magazine *Lacerba* (October 1, 1913) that Exter was sure to have read, given her close association with Ardengo Soffici, one of the Magazine's editors. Although Marinetti was writing about a kind of theatre very different from the one for which Exter chose to work - variety theatre was vauderville; The Kamerny was theatre in the grand tradition - his description of its dynamic on stage forms and colours, resulting from careful construction of scenery, lighting and gesture, was probably not lost on Exter and helped her to better understand Tairov's intentions. Other Futurist artists such as Giacomo Balla and Umberto Boccioni, also were involved in *sintesi*, The Futurist adaptations of vauderville routines that exaggerated ridiculous situations. These were short performances, aimed to shock the audience. In 1914, several *sintesi* were performed at Galleria Sprovieri in Rome at an exhibition in which several Russian artists, Exter, among them, participated. On the



opening night, a performance of the *sintesi, I funerali del filosofo passatista*, was given in which both Marinetti and Balla performed. The scenery in this and other *sintesi* was minimal and consisted usually of only a simple painted backdrop and a few props, the costumes, in most cases by Balla, were outrageous. Although Exter, in her work for the Kamerny theatre did not concern herself with these kinds of theatre/anti-theatre issues, she did at a later stage design sets and costumes for vauderville-related musical revue productions in the late 1920's, of which *Revue* (1929) is an example.

Marinetti travelled to St. Petersburg in 1914, but he was not welcomed by Mayakovsky, with his independent adoption of the aggressive and dynamic name of Futurist. There is little common ground shared by the two groups, but they were reconciled in their aim to break all links with aesthetic tradition, with both forces announcing "**dynamism**", the cult of speed, as the main contributor to the art of the future. One other significant connection, although literary, relates to Marinetti's *Words in Freedom* (*Parole in libertei*) and what the Russian Futurists called *trans-sense* or '*Za-Um*' writing. *Za-um* being the Russian word, a contradiction which means "Beyond meaning". The sound poetry of the Russian Futurist poets Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh was derived from the structure of language, to the roots and rhythms of words in use. It's relevance to the visual and plastic arts was substantial as it provided a precedent and a comparison for the works of Malevich and Tatlin and their influence on Exter and Popova.



The Italian Futurists showed little interest, in matters such as love themes, history or the use of archaic language. Whereas the Russian futurists frequently wrote love lyrics and showed a strong interest in antiquity. However, the most obvious difference between the two futurist groups was their attitude to World War I. Marinetti and his followers saw the war as an added bonus to society, militaristic energy dominated their art. The Russian futurist had expressed their fierce opposition to war, what they regarded as 'senseless bloodshed',<sup>2</sup> especially in their theatrical experiments, even before the war had begun.

It is interesting that the antecedents to the utilitarian Constructivist practices of the 1920's was this highly subjective form of art.

Mikhail Matyushin's opera *Victory over the Sun*, with the libretto by Kruchenykh was performed from 2 to 4 December 1913 in the Luna Park Theatre on Ofiterskaya Street in Petersburg. It has been said that *Victory over the Sun* has underservedly gained an impressive reputation. Konstantin Rudnitsky claims that the text of the libretto is primitive, poor and flat and Matyushin's music was not capable of generating much interest. It is the drawings by Malevich for the set and costumes which have brought recognition to the opera. It is difficult to evaluate to what degree Malevich's ideas were realized in the 1913 performance due to the amateurish quality of the production.<sup>3</sup>



Malevich had started to regard painting as an investigation of pictorial languages, in the same way that Exter and Popova began to treat their painting. Malevich started to use fragmented visual imagery in a manner that recalled the fragmentation of words in works by his poet colleagues. This attitude to recognizable imagery and its association with the pictorial constructions of his paintings was not that of an artist aiming to show the world as it appeared. Malevich employed Cubist devices of lettering, collage and fractured images in piecing together the painting *Private of the First Division*, that also comprises flat geometrical areas of paint. Different means of depiction and representation are contrasted. The thermometer and postage stamp being actual objects within the work. Yet areas of flat colours and representational details, such as the ear of the private balance the elements of collage. Lettering, the figure eight and the cross from a medal give further evidence of Malevich utilizing a variety of representation and visual references within a single painting. As a result, his painting executed in a variety of techniques, consists of an examination of a complete range of methods balanced one against the other. Cubism provided Malevich with a valuable precedent for investigating the means of painting and the nature of representation.

The Cubo-Futurist works of Exter produced in Paris prior to World War I, demonstrate an acute awareness of the analytic intent of Parisian Cubism. But they also manage to reveal a need to transcend the formalist implications of Cubist Art. It was during



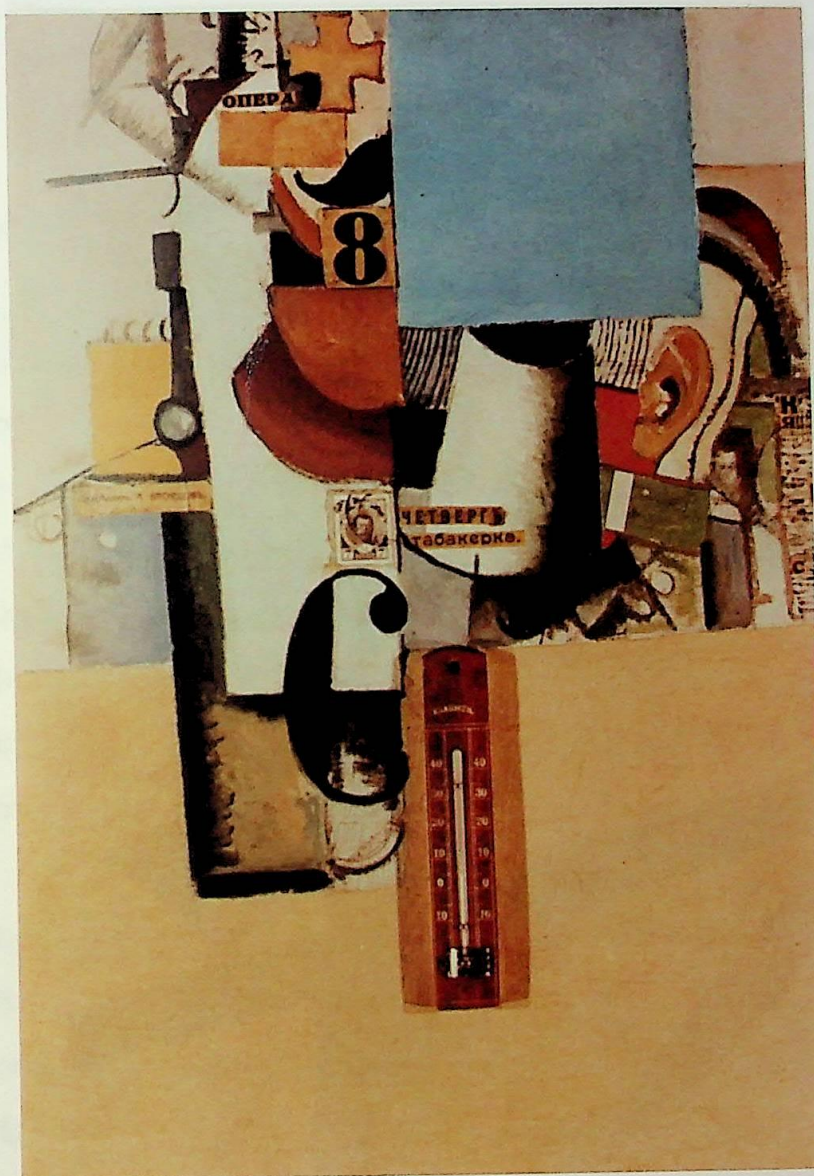


Fig. - 1 -



1912, that several Russian artists had aimed toward formalizing cubist postulates, Exter's efforts can be seen in her landscapes dating from the Winter of 1910-11. J. Tugendhold made the observation that these compositions contained structures artfully arranged in ovals or diamonds.<sup>4</sup>

In Exter's drawing "Cubo-Futurist" composition 1913, the artist's points of focus is on the purely geometric freedom of the pictorial plane. These appear to be executed as pure forms - circles, trapezoids, etc. The pictorial planes located at the limit of non-objective simplicity remove themselves from the right hand side of the composition, but the total spatial construction in the still life revolves around a material element:- the wine jug or carafe situated in all its solidity at the centre. Movement tends to rely exclusively on the formal implications, each geometric element constituting a world in itself. This is not limited to the purified form but also exists in the painting in a kinetic potential, which varies from one type of form to another. The powerful figurative component of the carafe, with its means of unifying the composition as a whole implies the strength which in 1913, a secular idea of space would return to works endowed with such analytic concentration.

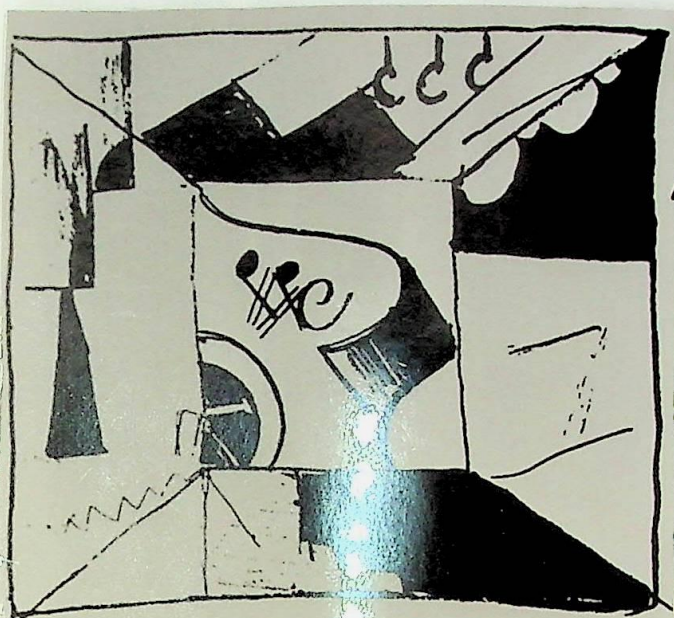
Hence, later on in 1913, when Malevich introduced his transrational solution (Za-um) this enabled both Exter and Popova to stop the reversion to naturalism and to avoid a formalism which could easily deteriorate into a purely decorative scheme. The removal of the 'real' meaning of objects and their transformation into arbitrary artistic elements is especially striking in Malevich's portrait of Matyushin (late 1913).



A tape measure crosses the complete width of the canvas, within this painting. It serves no realistic function, instead it acts as a unit of meaning, to negate the purely formal significance of the analytic fragmentation. This it achieves in a highly affirmative manner. This may also be said of the wooden spoons, the letters and inscriptions which Malevich uses in his transrational compositions of 1914. In Exter's work, letters and inscriptions have a function in line with cubist tradition of the object, this being the objects significance is either material (extra-pictorial subject and realist texture) or purely formal. In the 'formal' Exter includes isolated letters, with a definitive alogical intent, which eventually dissolves, being reduced in the entire composition to the significance of a purely formal sign. Malevich developed the semantic implications of this basically anti-formalist method, through his transrational compositions of 1914.

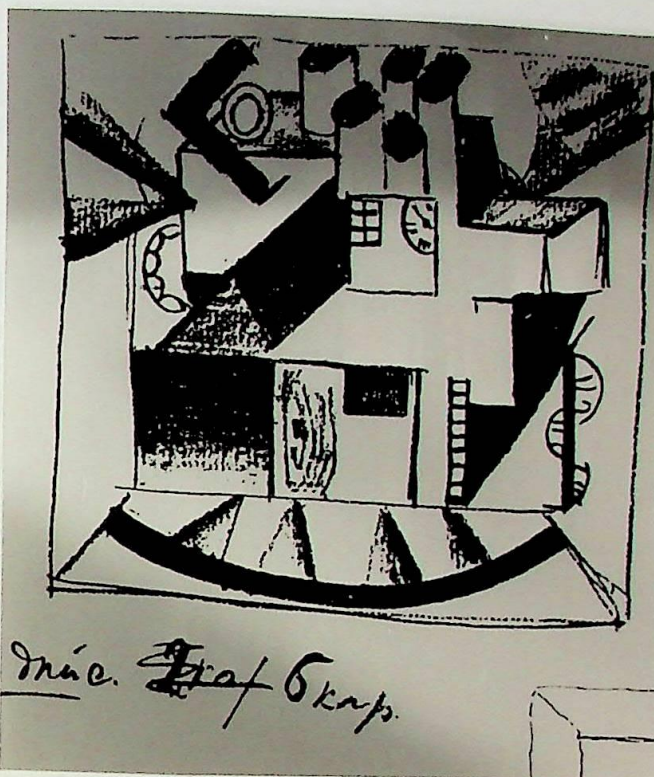
Historians of Malevich still argue as to whether the sketches for *Victory over the Sun* should be regarded as Cubist or should be ascribed to Suprematism, the term invented by Malevich to describe art without objects and the drawings of the set designs illustrate the reason for this debate. His famous *Black Square* appeared for the first time in one of the sketches for this production, along with lines, musical notes and question marks. This idea of place in his scenery was disregarded. It simply represented a kind of sombre, abstract back-ground for the actors' performances.





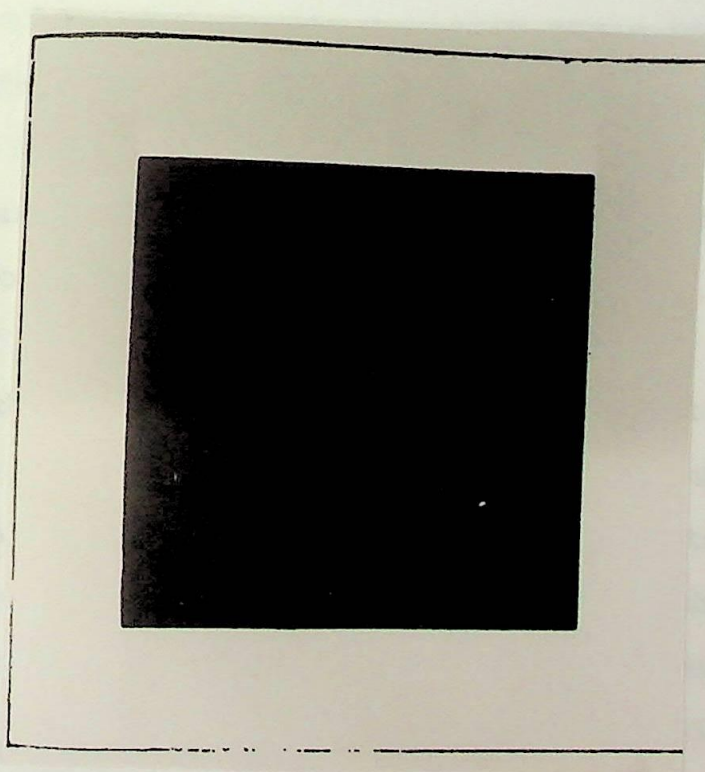
2<sup>o</sup> Картинка Зеленой и Красной  
1<sup>o</sup> Гнило

IV.



Днев. Граф Б. Кар.

Figs. 2, 3, 4





In contrast, the sketches for the costumes comprise a series of grotesque, sarcastic portrayals of militarized characters - half-human, half-robot. The figures of the 'strong men' are the most characteristic. Some of their faces are covered by medieval knights' visors,<sup>5</sup> other's heads are completely replaced by metal prisms and the bodies are covered by armour plating. Melevich's mechanized parade of devils according to Matyushin's intentions was supposed to have fore-told the 'end of future wars'. The actors had become 'denaturalized' by wearing these facial masks, to hide their character. In the film *Aelita*, directed by Protazanov (1924) the costumes and the sets for the Martian court were designed by Exter. *Aelita's* costume was made from rigid wooden units which were attached by hinges to the waist and ankles, with a further hinge at the knee. The actress became a mechanistic creature full of rhythm, this armour type clothing being strongly reminiscent of Malevich's designs for *Victory over the Sun*. In effect, Malevich's cubistic style backdrops signified a transition from Cubo-Futurism to the supermatist movement. A number of the backdrops represented a confused universe in which objects such as houses, chimneys, sun dials and staircases were combined with one another.

Illusionism had been abandoned. Malevich's *Black Square* was not a painting of a square, it was a square preoccupied by spatial concerns. Presentation had superseded representation, the black square having reduced narrative content to a nothing. Malevich's designs for the set of *Victory over the Sun* reflected this concern for the 'non-objective' in modern art. His costumes and



backdrops created a unique pictorial style. He also introduced his own use of lighting design, the players who were reduced to merely decomposable motifs, were integrated into the action. This somewhat isolated but essential experience introduced into the development of modern theatre, an alliance between the artist's need to experiment and to discover a plastic, three-dimensional setting.

In his introduction to the catalogue, *Stage designs and the Russian Avant-garde (1911-1929)*, John E. Bowlt states that although the costumes for *Victory over the Sun* may strike the viewer as very 'theatrical' in their exaggeration of main features in a particular character, they are not the most important part of the visual component the fact, as he claims, was that Malevich was a painter and not a designer, depicting all the characters in profile indicating that he did not envisage them in volumetrical terms. In this production, Malevich perceived the actor as an extension of the Cubist canvas and not as a mobile, constructive form. This may seem like a rather harsh criticism, but it is a relatively accurate assessment. The sets in a sense worked for here Malevich was competent in adapting his method of suprematist 'non-objective' painting to the context of a theatrical production. But although the costumes are innovative in their denaturalization of the actor, the sketches for the costumes remain 'two-dimensional' and pictorial, they fail to become new structures in their own right. This is the primary difference between Malevich and both Exter and Popova. They were painter, sculptor and stage designer simultaneously, Malevich failed to be so adaptable.



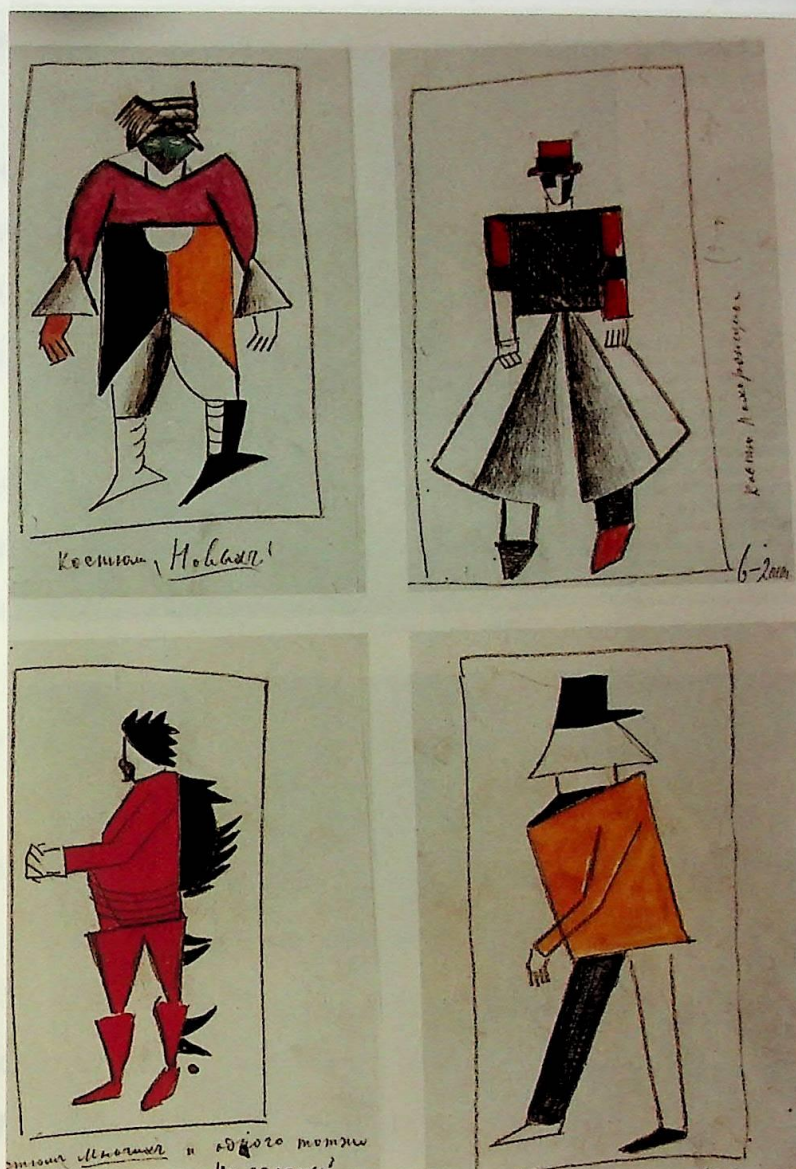


Fig. - 5 -



While *Victory over the Sun* broke with many traditions of the theatre, it did not define and categorize new systems; it asked more questions than it answered. Yet it was this transitional quality, this ambiguity that attracted Exter and Popova, to the theatre of the later Avant-garde. Therefore it is not too far fetched to speculate that Malevich, Exter and Popova, to a lesser extent, shared a definite attitude to subject matter. They moved in many aspects away from an art of illusionary images towards the construction of art works with material that was non-representational. It has been mentioned that Malevich, as were Exter and Popova, was concerned with cubism (initially at any rate). Tatlin was another artist inspired by Cubism and he also went one step further with this concept of representation and it's replacement by the presentation of real material.

In setting apart the examination of material, it's functions, and construction, which stems from material rather than aesthetic concerns, Tatlin (1895-1953) provided the basis of a novel attitude to exploring creative work, revolutionary in nature because it left behind the realm of predilection and nuance to which painting was so sensitive, moving towards the solidity of real material existence. Tatlin was thus regarded as the source of an independent art, free from self-expression. All this was vital to the analysis of art suggested by Constructivist practitioners and critics. The primary theory was that painting and sculpture are artificial domains created by artists hoping to find self-expression alone. Exter and Popova saw in Tatlin's undertaking of the study of materials and of construction a removed and objective purpose for the artist or 'the constructor'



But the interesting fact is that Tatlin's constructions, rarely desert the format of painting or relief to become free-standing sculptures. The study of construction began to be seen as a basic activity of creative work which was seen to be functioning as much as film, theatre or architecture as it was in painting or sculpture. Once construction had replaced composition, the particular metier, be it within the theatre, became a function of the material form which the work was to be built.

Despite the fact that Tatlin designed his costumes for *The Emperor Maximilian and his Disobedient Son Adolf* before his significant discovery of Picasso's reliefs and therefore before his own constructive work,<sup>6</sup> he had already depicted a spatial and volumetrical sensation. Tatlin's costumes appeared to be intended for a moving, three dimensional construction, the human form, and not a static surface. The emphasis on the use of the spiral structure provided the designs with a distinct vertical impetus. Tatlin's aim to place vision under the control of touch, already found in these costumes was also expressed in his sets for both the Emperor and its counterpart for Ivan Susanin (1913): The gothic architecture for the Emperor and the Pyramidal 'geometric' construction of the forest in the *Ivan Susanin* were the forerunners of certain Constructivist designs of the 1920's, for example in the simple combinations of arches and columns used by Isaak Rabinovich.<sup>7</sup> In addition, the critic Auslender observed<sup>8</sup> there was an obvious attempt to integrate the



actor and audience in the Emperor; no footlights were employed and actors moved freely from stage to audience. This was derived from the traditions of the circus, where disbelief is not suspended as it is in the theatre, the performer is free to approach the audience. Meyerhold/Popova were later to exploit the directness and physicality of the circus performance in their work. The production of the Emperor, be it in St. Petersburg or in Moscow (1912) did in effect just scratch the surface of possibilities and did not confirm them. It was the future works of Exter and Popova which resulted in a breakthrough of concepts, worlds and a new style decor.

Tatlin's tower or monument to the third international (1919-20) was his sole mechanized piece, the monument was to commemorate the 1917 revolution.

Even when it came to a satisfactorily advanced stage for a full size model to be constructed, it's revolving suspended rooms, which, when built were planned to be huge and to turn at varying speeds, had to be rotated by a young boy with a simple hand device on the occasion when the model was shown in Moscow. Machinery stood for clarity of construction, economy of means and the investigation of the inherent qualities of different materials. Engineers were a source of inspiration for Constructivist sculptors. Popova aimed to exemplify their accuracy and control in the machine like designs or kinetic devices she constructed for Meyerhold's production of Fernand Cromelyne's tragic-farce *The*



**Magnanimous Cuckold.** Although Tatlin's 'Tower' structure demanded the reconciliation of geometrical forms of a weight-bearing piece and gravity's pull, and Tatlin had to move closer to engineers and away from the study of materials:- the intuitive element in Tatlin's study of construction remains the device of the doubling leaning spiral.

The new Post-Revolutionary teaching studios, namely Vkhutemas in Moscow, the Petrograd Free Studios and the theatrical institutions of which the Institute of Artistic Culture (INKhUK) was the most important; all these were provided with a basis for study through Tatlin's investigation of material construction in his relief and counter-reliefs. The Meyerhold/Popova productions were committed to a stage without illusion, at times Meyerhold set the action in the auditorium, either off stage or on extensions of the stage, to deny the traditional division between the stage and the everyday world. This provided a theatrical parallel to Tatlin's counter-reliefs. For the 'make-believe' realm of the picture space or the stage space had its Construction and its supporting paraphernalia revealed: simultaneously the artists, contradicting the aims of traditional perspective, moved decisively forward in space, either off the picture 'surface' or out of the proscenium front, into non-illusionistic physical space shared with the viewer. On stage, without footlights, Popova's sets had become gymnastic apparatus. For Meyerhold actors whose mobility was fully athletic replaced aesthetics. The actor became mechanical object controlled by Meyerhold's system of 'Biomechanics'. This employed the physical qualities of the actor, the actor thus became the material used by the director, in much the same way as Tatlin



Fig. 6

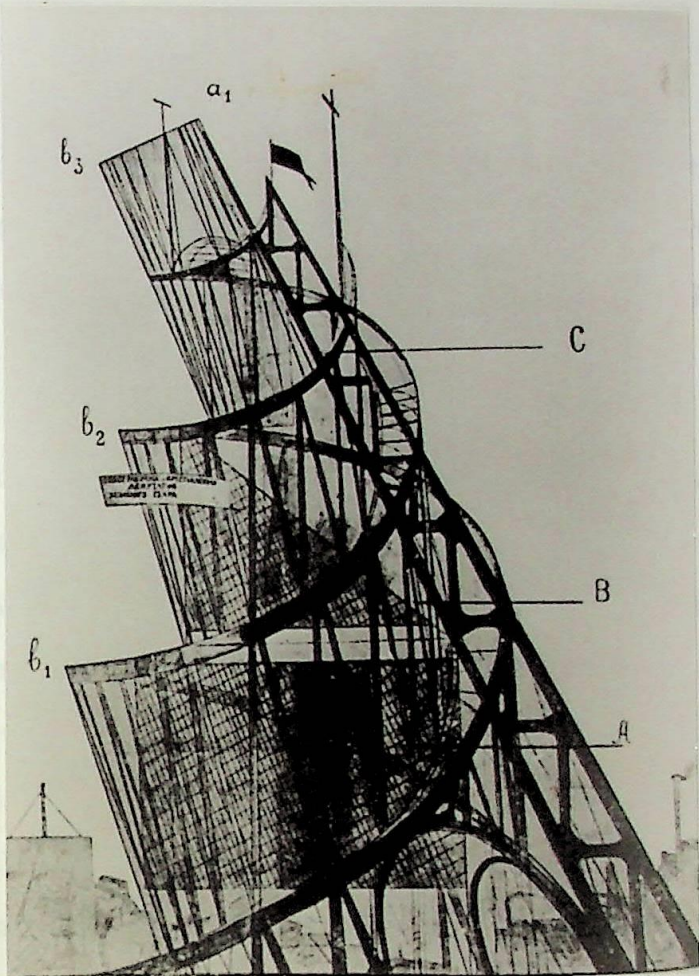
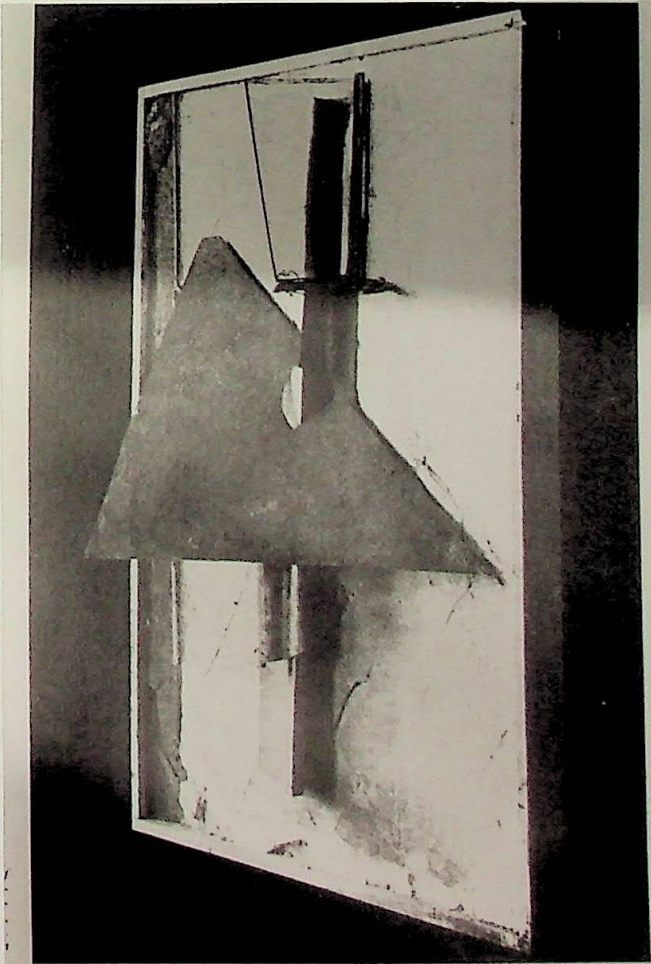


Fig. 7





had examined the material construction possible with, or natural to, the physical elements of metal, wood and glass. (For some time Popova had worked in Tatlin's studio, between 1912 and 1915). Similarly Tatlin's study of geometrical and reproducible construction was reflected in works by the Stenberg Brothers, Alexander Rodchenko and Popova.

In 1919, the once college of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture which along with the Stroganov College of Applied Art formed into the new higher Artistic and Technical Studios (Vkhutemas) located in Moscow. The influence of Tatlin and Malevich was strongly felt. The college was not shaped to adhere to any certain art or design but it did develop a strong non-objective body. In 1918, Popova had joined the teaching staff at the Vkhutemas, where she and Alexander Vesnin (Exter also taught for a brief spell 1921-22) taught colour construction on the basic course.

The second college established was in Moscow in 1920, the Institute of Artistic Culture (INKhUK), Popova was also a member of INKhUK, she actively participated in the debates of the General Working Group of Objective Analysis especially in the crucial discussions concerning the nature of composition and construction. She presented papers in INKhUK concerning her design for *The Magnanimous Cuckold* in 1922 and in response to her commission wrote a paper "Toward the Question of the New Methods on our Art School".



INKhUK, under its Constructivist command organised two exhibitions which reveal the evolution in Constructivist thinking. These exhibitions were those of Obmokhu (Union of Young Artist) held in Moscow in May 1921, and the exhibition  $5 \times 5 = 25$  held in Moscow in September 1921. In the works of the Obmokhu exhibition, by the group's members (including Rodchenko and the Stenberg brothers) it is possible to locate the influence of both aspects of Tatlin's work. The first stemmed from the study of materials and the other arrived from a study of the structural properties of geometric forms. The result was that a linear construction instinctively preserved the integrity of its elements. Every line was depicted as clearly and as separately as possible, as in the linking of units in reliefs by Tatlin and free standing constructions by the Stenberg brothers. Rodchenko's drawings for the  $5 \times 5 = 25$  catalogue, reveal this treatment of the line, as do his drawings and paintings from the period 1920-21. They may be the most doctrinaire expressions of Constructivist work in two dimensions differing from Popova's work of this period. The dynamic diagonals of her paintings and even of her most minimal drawings of the period are impressive in the unpretentious force of the creative work behind them. They contrast with the slower movement within Rodchenko simultaneous drawings.

In using the term Culture instead of Art the Constructivists showed their awareness of the social role of the creative individual. They were to replace fine art with politically and socially committed design, the construction not of small assemblages of varying materials, but of steps towards, and objects for the new state. Before the Constructivists reached this position the





Fig. - 8 -



second exhibition that held vital implications for the Constructivists was held in Moscow in September 1921. The very title of the show  $5 \times 5 = 25$ , indicated it's basic mathematical bias. As well as refering to the fact that five Constructivists each contributed five pieces to the exhibition, which was possibly the concluding exhibition of Constructivist arts.

The exhibitors were Exter, Popova, Varvara Stepanova, Vesnin and Rodchenko. Exter's and Popova's paintings were similar in that their exhuberant and colourful canvases which, for the toughness of their pictorial construction, contained impressive vitality. They added all the qualities of colour which Malevich had begun to allow for himself, to the outlining clarity and firmness of Construction demanded by constructivism. In theory, pictorial Construction was absolutely conceivable in terms of Constructivism, but any sense of illusion was eliminated with an emphasis upon the psychological impact of colour and line being equally forbidden. So to construct, rather than to compose a painting meant the use of lines and forms across non-recessive flat space and to reveal the constructive possibilities of the material to hand, be it line and shape and colour, or as gouache or oil paint on board or canvas. Thus, as Constructivist, Exter and Popova would not have seen their paintings as abstract, but rather as self-contained solid constructions of material, say comprising of lines colours and shapes. It was the actual lines themselves rather than the suggestive qualities of lines and colours which were important.





Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Construction is a postemporary attempt

The first stage of Constructivism witnessed Tatlin's pioneering reliefs, the next phase saw Tatlin's tower. The evolution of it's theory had led to the shunning of aesthetic speculation and self-expression. Both of these phases were generally completed after the exhibitions of 1921. In it's third stage Constructivism examined it's function as a force in the building of useful and practical objects, and on a wider scale, it's function within the structuring of the New Society. The rigid laws of Constructivism had been defined by Tatlin, Rodchenko and others in the area of the culture of materials and geometrical construction, without the constraint of those material considerations of a function imposed from without: 'Construction for life' was the third phase of constructivism, the phase in which both Exter and Popova planted their roots, as painters/ designers of the Constructivist theatre.

Down with Art

Now the Constructivists looked to the practical design of chairs, clothes and an entire material culture plan for everyday life. Every object constituted a part of the new life structure. The new look was founded upon the Constructivists' formal investigation. It signified the start of the simultaneous spread and dissolution of Constructivist ideals.

Most of the Constructivists who made the change stopped using the terms Constructivist and adopted the new title, that of 'Productivist'. Rodchenko clarified the situation in 1921 when he said '



"Construction is a contemporary attempt to organize in Utilitarian deployment of materials. Constructive life is the art of the future. It is time for art to flow into the organisation of life".

The following year, theoretical and experimental Constructivism became committed and practiced productivism. In a sense Exter and Popova's work within the Constructivist theatre was as art Productivists. In the same year (1922) Alexei Gan published his theories in his book 'Constructivism' Gan stated that art was indistinguishable from theology, metaphysics and mysticism. Artistic creativity moved nearer to work, the Constructivist was becoming a designer. Gan proclaimed <sup>10</sup>

"Down with Art".

This stand was more easily held by Constructivist theorists than by practitioners of Constructivism, such as Exter and Popova.

covering face

The term 'Constructivist' was invented only in 1922, and it is in effect not legitimate to apply it to art created before that time.

John B. Swilt - Stage designer and the Russian Avant-Garde.  
p. 6



## FOOTNOTES

## Chapter One

- 1 A. Gvozdev "Vmesto Predisloviia" in Teatralnyi Oktiabr, Leningrade - Moscow, 1926, No. 1 p. 28  
(Translation, Lodder, C. Russian Constructivism)
- 2 K. Rudnitsky - The Theatrical Experiments of the Russian Futurists Russian and Soviet Theatre, Tradition and the Avant-Garde - p. 11
- 3 Ibid. p. 12
- 4 J. Tugendhold - Alexandra Exter (Berlin 1922)
- 5 Visor - Term used to describe moveable part of helmet covering face
- 6 The term 'Constructivist' was invented only in 1920, and it is in effect not legitimate to apply it to art created before that time.
- 7 John E. Bowlit - Stage designs and the Russian Avant-Garde. p. 6



## CHAPTER TWO

- 8 S. Auslender. 'Vecher Soiuza Molodezhi' in Russkaia Khudozestvennaia Letopis, St. Petersburg, 1911, No. 4 p. 60

9. John Milner "Russian Revolutionary Art p. 52

10. Alexei Gan 'Constructivism' 1922 p. 18

Her first theatrical work was done in Moscow between the years 1914 and 1924. She later moved to Paris, where she continued to design and work as a teacher through the 1920's and early 1930's. After 1933, there are no known productions attributed to Exter. On March 17, 1949 she died in poverty and obscurity, where she had lived for many years, at Fontenay-Aux Roses near Paris. She was one of the great creators of Constructivist (abstract geometric design and massive structured form) stage and costume designs. Her ability to work imaginatively and creatively in masses of rich and often brilliant colours is once again being acclaimed as strongly as it was some fifty years ago.



## CHAPTER TWO

Alexandra Alexandrovna Exter was born in Belostok, near Kiev on January 6 1882. She graduated from the Kiev Art School in 1906. She travelled to Paris in 1908, where she studied at the Academie de la Grande Chaumiere under Carlo Delvall. A year later Exter set up a studio in Paris and became acquainted with Picasso, Braque, Apollinaire and with Marinetti. For the next five years she travelled extensively between Paris and Russia, importing Cubist and Futurist ideas into Russia. She also visited Italy. Her own work at this time displayed the influence of these new ideas. Her assimilation of Cubism was accompanied by a decorative interest in colour and rhythm.

Her first theatrical work was done in Moscow between the years 1914 and 1924. She later moved to Paris, where she continued to design and work as a teacher through the 1920's and early 1930's. After 1933, there are no known productions attributed to Exter. On March 17, 1949 she died in poverty and obscurity, where she had lived for many years, at Fontevay-Aux Roses near Paris. She was one of the great creators of Constructivist (abstract geometric design and massive structured form) stage and costume design. Her ability to work imaginatively and creatively in masses of rich and often brilliant colours is once again being acclaimed as strongly as it was some fifty years ago.<sup>1</sup>



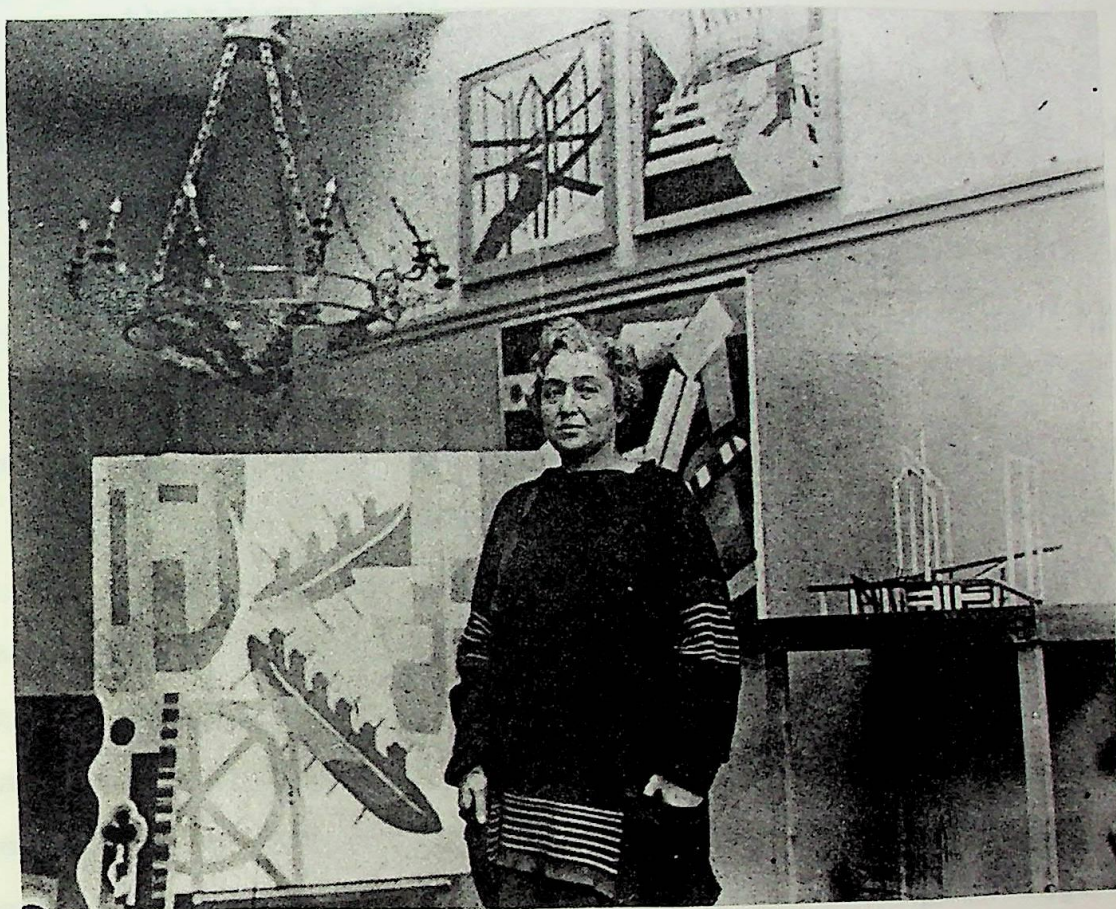


Fig. - 11 -



Extar worked extensively in easel painting, and as Dr. Nakov points out.<sup>2</sup> There is no clear distinction to be made

'Between Extar's theatrical and Non-theatrical work'

On November 2, 1916, The Kamerny Theatre in Moscow put on their presentation of Famira Kifared, a tragedy written by the Russian poet Innokentii Annenskii, directed by the theatre's founder Alexander Tairov, and designed by Extar. This was Extar's first theatrical production, and in it she quite literally set the scene for the truly modernist style of theatrical design, which was to be further developed in productions for the Kamerny theatre, amongst others in Russia prior to 1923. (Afterwards travelling back to Europe). The sets and costumes were inspired by the fundamental characteristics of non-objective counter reliefs and were regarded as revolutionary in the theatre by the contemporary critics. Extar's approach to theatre design was largely shaped by the arrival of non-objective painting. Her contribution to Russian theatre is vital in that she proved to be one of the most original creators, acting not only as forerunner but also as teacher and guide. She helped to define theatrical design in the U.S.S.R. in the 1920's, through her relentless teaching in Kiev, Odessa, Moscow and then in Paris (1922). What Extar was offering was a new vision of the stage as a constructively dynamic spatial arena, alive with linear, colouristic and planar relationships laden with dramatic intent. As shown in the photographs of Famira Kifared, Salome and Romeo and Juliet, Extar's handling of visual elements, such as scenery, lighting and costumes, produced a succession of outstanding stage



pictures. She aimed in each scene to intensify the presentation, to get the meanings and moods across in a richly allusive yet particular and straight forward language of forms, colours and surfaces. These spoke to and about the sensibility stemming from urban industrial culture.

Although after 1916, Exter was mainly concerned with her theatrical work, it would be a mistake to think that she completely rejected her 'pure painting' in preference to the more decorative concerns of the theatre. Again the most crucial point in Exter's theatrical work is that it evolved from and in accordance with her pictorial creations. The two are interdependent on one another. They relate to one another in an elusive dialogue. From the Russian non-objective experience (i.e. the freedom of supermatism to the strict structure of constructivism) Exter's stage designs and 'pure' painting are some of the most original work.

Until 1914, Parisian Cubism and Italian Futurism were the foundations of Exter's painting. But she was never ruled by either of these two styles. She developed as an artist fully aware of her own needs and capable of deciding her own direction within the new plastic perspective of Cubo-Futurism. From 1911 onwards Parisian Cubism had a less influence on Exter, J. Tugenhold referred to her work as of a formalist tendency, concerned with the solution of the problem of dynamic composition.



Her interpretation of Cubo-Futurist painting was not defined by the impression of movement as carried out by the Italian painters, (Balla, Boccioni, Carra) but instead was a analytic study of the system of rotative forces. Her paintings of 1915 reveal this area of study. Spiral staircases form a continuous movement, dominating the old representational view of a composition and changing it into a 'dynamic skein'. This kind of experience (found also in Popova) is at the heart of the first theatrical costumes for Famira Kifared (1916). When compared to the gouaches for the scenes. *Explosion, movement, weight, (Ralryv, Drizmenie, Ves)* of 1916<sup>4</sup>, the costumes show the same passion for movement and desire to define different planes, stratified and disposed in a spiral and centrifugal movement. In contrast to the contemporary practice of submitting a descriptive full face project for a costume, Exter's designs are 'in motion', illustrating the composite image of movement which the actor would create on stage, in turn this movement would permit the realization of the full plastic amplitude of the costume (to take place).

It was not until after 1916 that Exter had gained the purification of the complexities of movement. She had been successful in mastering the non-objective language of pure forms, and made this vocabulary act in relation to the dynamic laws of Futurism. Exter's work of the second half of 1916, with her forementioned series of gouaches to be published in the album *Explosion, Movement, Weight*. Although this publication was never realized, the album's title outlined the problem of this first



phase in Russian Constructivist painting. Exter's role in the progress of this section of non-objective art must be emphasized, as in 1915 she provided the experience of Italian Futurism, adapted through the formal clarity of Paris Cubism.

The concept of a self-generating, rotating point is measured in Bocconi's work from 1912-13 (and in Leger's). Of course, it was Malevich's work which provided it in Russia. The difference between Malevich's interpretation of this principle and Exter's is that the former sees it as a dynamic disposition (the formalist and absolute futurist illustration of movement). Whereas Exter brings about the rotation of the point so as to create 'planes'. This refers to Tatlin's materialistic position and the entire reactional conception of Constructivism which stems from this position. In opposition to the free existence of independent forms, typical of suprematism, Tatlin visualises the importance of his reliefs emerging from the confliction amongst the materials. This inter-play within the elements causes new forms and directional tensions which result in determining the structure, perhaps even the very existence, of the (tangent), space of Constructivist painting. An appropriate example is the gouache by Exter, from Explosion, Movement, Weight series, where within the centrifugal movement of the lower circle activates from, when this movement is fragmented it creates planes.

The interaction of two simultaneous plastic experiences makes possible the study of the practical application of an artistic concern. This being represented by the costumes (Famira Kifared) and its analytical counterpart, being the scenes of gouaches.



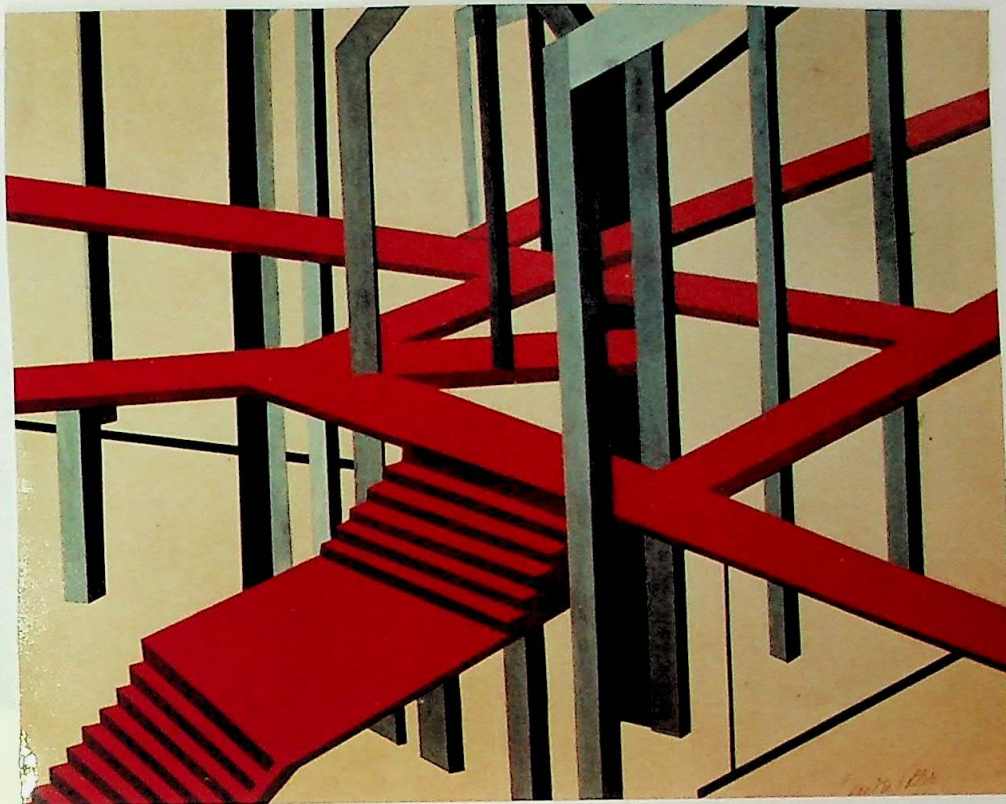
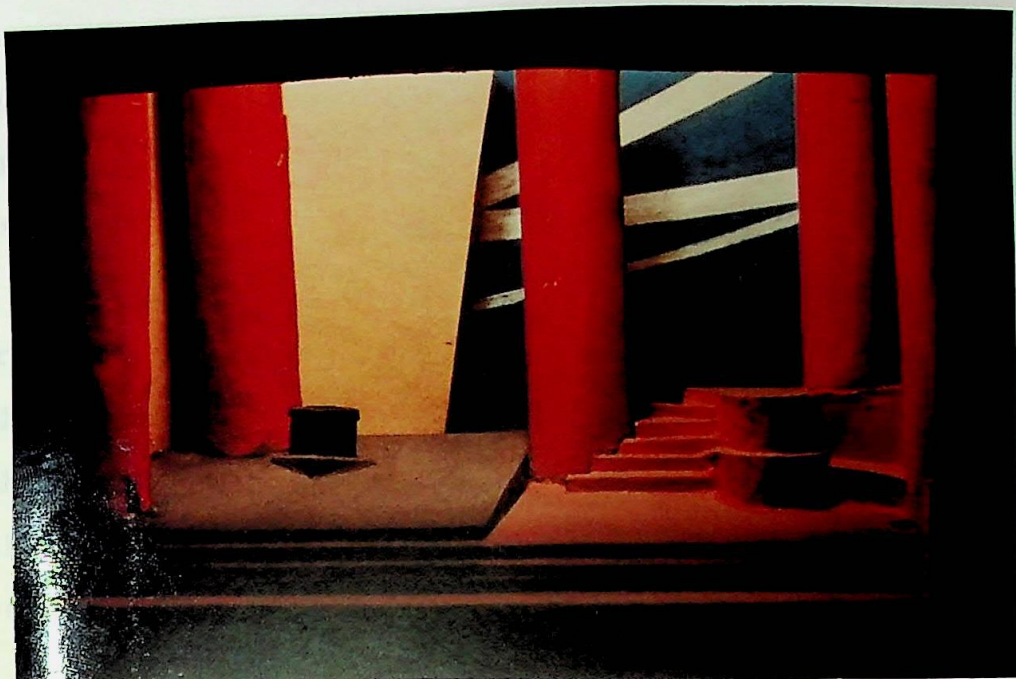


Fig. - 12 -



Fig. - 13 -





Figs. - 14 -





Exter did not merely transpose her gouaches onto the stage of Fimara Kifared. She tested the use of various materials (wood and metal) to make true living sculptures. The actors (performers) natural dynamic attributes were also used to achieve a new level of expression. The actors's limbs were painted in order to highlight the changing plasticity of musculature in motion. Hence the old, Futurist activity of painting the body - *epatage* - to shock the bourgeoisie, which had been exploited<sup>5</sup> by Burliuk and Mayakovsky and Larionov in 1913 and 1914, was borrowed by Exter.

Exter took the idea of painting the body from the aesthetic device of the painted surface of a new level, showing the dynamic structure of the image. In virtually the same way, the texture principle of the Constructivists, referring to the different selection of materials, was broadened so as to include the use of the most unexpected material, the actor's own physical muscles are set in motion.

Exter chose to work with Alexander Tairov and his Kamerny theatre because they shared a similar approach to the new artistic culture. The state of theatre in the decade before the First World War was not unlike the state of art. Realism and its accompanying esthetic of 'archaeological verisimilitude'<sup>6</sup> had controlled the theatre internationally since the early 19th Century and was still flourishing in the early 20th Century, admittedly in the more sophisticated form of naturalism. In Russia, the most recognised example of naturalism was Stanislavsky's Moscow Art Theatre. As shown by a scene from *Cherry Orchard*, all elements of this theatre from scenery and



costumes to acting-imitating 'real life' Tairov (along with Meyerhold and others) found naturalism a restrictive and unproductive approach that disguised the true nature of the theatre under the appearances of life.

Tairov maintained that theatre was an art in itself and he therefore aimed to train a company of master actors who would be able to improvise upon an idea in the tradition of the *commedia dell'arte*<sup>7</sup>. He believed in this 'Synthetic Theatre', including in one company all the talents of ballet, opera, circus, music hall and drama. For Tairov the development lay not only in a synthesis of all the arts but in a complex stage machinery which would act as an extension to the actors' craft. Based on a combination of practical experience and theory, Tairov founded what he viewed as his 'emancipated' theatre, the Kamerny (1914). He did so by using the ideas of George Fuchs, Adolphe Appia and Edward Gordon Craig.

From Fuchs, Tairov adopted the idea that the truest form of scenery was three-dimensional, following the tradition of the architectural examples of the ancient stage, because it created a plastic unity with actors (also 3-D forms) to a larger extent than was possible with either realistic decoration or painted flats. From Appia he required the need to integrate the elements of a production through rhythm, the one trait common to all of them. The temporal, including speech, motion and sound (music), and the spatial, including scenery, costume and actor. Both Appia and Tairov made the actor the unifying element of both temporal and spatial rhythms. Edward Gordon Craig provided



Tairov with a model of directional ambition and imagination. Craig's production of Hamlet was the highlight of the Moscow season, in 1911. Staged in Craig's awe-inspiring symbolist style, he liberally combined (contrary to Fuchs and Appia) two and three dimensional elements in the set to communicate major themes. From the start, Tairov was aware that it would take him some time to fully realize his theatre, it is not that usual, but the elements that give him the most difficulty were visual. While he was content with the progression of the 'pantomime' style of acting, its effects were lost in the impressionistic stage picture created by the painted flats and exaggerated detail costumes of the first productions.

It appeared that to talk about concepts like 'plastic unity' and 'rhythms' was easier than providing them with a visual expression. After two years of observing the Kamerny theatre develop, Exter, who had painted the theatre's entrance area and designed the house curtain, turned her attention to set production. According to Tairov, *Famira Kifared*, due to Exter's contribution, was his first really successful play. The symbolist poet Annenski's script for the production was derived from the story of the myth of Thamira, The Thracian bard who on challenging the muses to a contest on the lyre<sup>8</sup> was blinded for his arrogance. The text emphasised erotic themes, centering on the passion of Ariope, Thamira's mother, for her son, and it stressed the stark contrast between Apollonian purity and Dionysian abandon. The rhythm of the script corresponded to the



metaphorical rhythms of the Apollonian and Dionysian position, the flux position of 'harmonious' with the 'delirious fury' of the different passages. This rhythm also controlled Tairov's mise-en-scene and Exter's designs.

The set made of numerous layers of cubical and conical forms could adapt to both reserved and frenzied actions. Exter's set was not only a translation from her non-objective painting, it was also intended to evoke the Thracian hills of Greece, the location in the text, with cubical forms as rocks and conical forms as cypresses. The black and gold colours of the rocks represented good and evil forces respectively linked to the Apollonian and Dionysian rhythms. But it was the sets intensification of drama that pleased Tairov so much. It created a flowing succession of dynamic, plastic unities.

Painted bodies (costumes for the chorus of satyrs, representing the Dionysian rhythm, Exter heightened contrasts in contour, surface and texture, using not only body paint but wigs and false breasts to imply their vitality and extreme lusk. When comparing her drawings, with the photographs of the actual production, they show how accurately she imagined and the constructed the stage picture, treating it as one of her paintings. Evidently none of the additional elements Exter had to consider in her theatre design: like three dimensional forms in real space and the problem of function, gave her any great difficulty. It was quite probate that her training as a painter helped her with these.



The next production Exter did for the Kamerny was Salome premiered in Moscow on October 9, 1917. Tairov's adaption of the Oscar Wilde text stressed the inevitability of Salome's tragic end, and Exter communicated this theme with the set, which contained more dynamic elements than had Famira Kifared. The experiments in the series of 'Explosion, Movement, Weight' also inspired the decors for Salome. All the features of dynamic supermatism which Malevich had evoked during late 1915-16 were realized. They directed Exter closer to a subsequent painting style whose organisation was solidly structurised - Constructivism.

Malevich's 'Suprematist Manifesto' (1915) with its principle of the free navigator of purely formal geometric elements; this inspired Exter's formidable sets for Salome, which were capable of moving and became the plastic commentary of the play. The concept of an innovative non-objective painting were applied to a new geometric order Salome's death was depicted by the use of five red fabric triangles which fell onto the stage. The non-objective stage decor was structured by placing diagonally opposing right angles which arranged the stage space in depth in line with the new dynamic laws of colour. In Exter's costume designs she once again used the principles of diagonal Construction, this was to become the basis for Exter's Constructivist painting during the years from 1918-21. To increase her knowledge of colour as both material and force, Exter considered these possibilities first in themselves and also as visual equivalents for mood and emotion in the theatre. This is evident in comparing a model of scenic decoration for Salome,



in which pieces of coloured surfaces that Exter planned to use as cloths and curtains are shown, with paintings such as *Dynamic Composition I and II* (1916). The overlapping relationships in the maquette can also be found in *Coloured Rhythms* and *Coloured Tensions*, two paintings of 1918.

The diagonal cloths and curtains were revealed at critical moments in *Salome* - diagonal black streamers draped the stage as *Salome* was being killed. According to records both audiences and critics viewed the 'message' becoming active participants in the theatrical experience, 'reading' the set and costumes for thematic revelations. *Salome's* costume silvery blue with spiky extensions and seductive slits at the same time repulsive and tempting, was a constructively dynamic metaphor of 'impatient virgin sensuality', according to one Russian critic.<sup>9</sup> Suitably, Exter's costume - sketch showing *Salome's* confident stride, was also a plastic analogy of her character. The meaning of her particular posture and gesture has its source in Boccioni's notions of the associative properties of 'line-force, colour-force form-force'. This sketch recalls the studying figure of Boccioni's unique forms of continuity in space.

Mikhail Mordkin choreographed the movements, to a special score composed by the Czechoslovakian Jules Giutel, the Kamerny's *Salome* surpassed the famous 1912 Paris production of *Salome* by Bakst for *Ballet Russes* performer Ida Rubinstein. Whilst Bakst's style relied on the impression made by intensely coloured and ornately decorated flat surfaces that often took over the other elements. Exter's style relied on her ability to articulate each





Fig. - 16 -





Fig. - 17 -



forms is perceptible in several of the projects for the costumes element's presence or role individually and also part of an integrated whole. The individual elements in her production came together on the basis of dynamic contrast, working together, working against each other. Salome's appeal was its power to communicate visual and emotional sensations in a manner that was purely modern.

The play of lights and of non-objective elements in motion provided the source for a number of pictorial experiments in 1918. The theatre in 1917 presented pictorial Constructivism with an ideal plastic experiment, this simplifies the realisation that the most interesting innovations among the Constructivist painters were Exter's - a year after Salome. If we accept that Malevich had brought painting to the free manipulation of planes, the painters closest to him such as Exter and Popova automatically tried to manipulate the possible dynamic laws for the organisation of pictorial masses. Malevich had encountered a new and more liberal conception of geometrical elements through his decor of *Victory over the Sun* (1913) this in turn had led him to supermatism. Although Exter's experiments differed considerably from those of Malevich it was in a similar way, through theatrical experimentation that Exter established the foundations for the very important chapter of Constructivist painting.

So in her theatre work Exter had a special interest in the movement of forms in space and also applied this to the actors' movements on the stage, whom she envisaged as living non-objective Constructions in motion. Her practical adaptation of Cubo-Futurist conception highlighted by the rotative movement of



forms is perceptible in several of the projects for the costumes of Famira Kifared and Salome, and is also evident in the sets and costumes for Tairov's production of Shakespheare's Romeo and Juliet (1921). It was her third and last production for the Kamerny. It demonstrated her ability to modernize history, here the Italian Renaissance by applying the same guidelines she used in Salome. For in Salome, the stage picutres in Romeo and Juliet are similar to her paintings of this period, such as composition and construction of colours (1921). In both the play and paintings, there are interpenetrating diagonal networks of bars and wedges, in the play these relationships could be read as the visual equivalent to the tangled intrigues in this adapted translation of Shakepeare's tragedy. The costumes for Romeo and Juliet were created as actual moving counter-reliefs. They were made from a variety of materials and caused the actors to carry out complex and awkward rotations. These costumes were moving sculptures which enabled Exter to explore the principle of the rotative interaction of planes pivoting around a central axis.

At the end of 1921, Popova's painting reflected similar experiments which have to be related to Exter's work.

There was a very close friendship between these two artists Popova, in particular had great admiration of Exter.

The production of Romeo and Juliet revealed other innovations with plastic concerns; space became vertically dynamic with the use of several platforms and staircases. The reflections of the actors' movements could be seen in mirrors that caused an



illusion of a multiplicity of spatial planes. Exter's inclusion of independent platforms stems from her idea of suprimposed and multi-pictorial accumulation of planes in her paintings. This was the first stage production to use independent platforms and from 1922-23, most Constructivists used these elements as the basic structural organisation of the stage space. Once again Exter used free-standing platforms in her designs for Goleizorski's ballet production in 1922<sup>10</sup> anticipating the famous set by Popova for Meyerhold's production of **The Magnanimous Cuckold**.





Fig. - 18 -



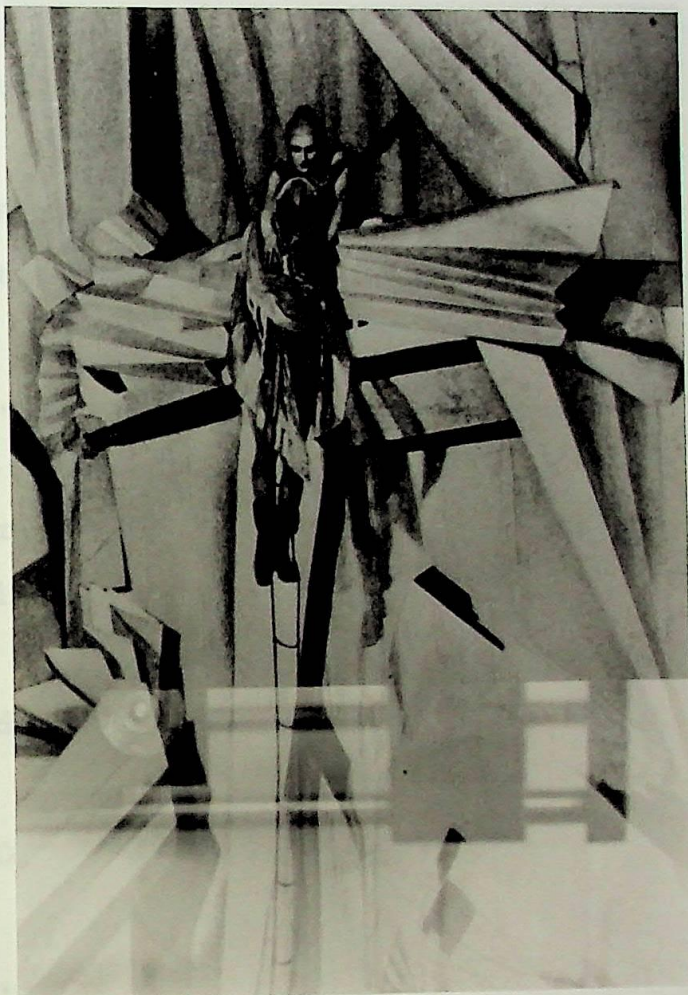


Fig. - 19 -



## FOOTNOTES

## Chapter Two

1. R.H. Cohen. 'Alexandra Exter's Designs for the Theatre'. Art Forum, Summer 1981, p. 46
2. Andrei B. Nakov, Essay - 'Painting and Stage Design'. A creative dialogue p. 8. One of four essays from 'Alexandra Exter, Artist of the Theatre' - Catalogue - The New York Public Library (Spring-Summer 1974)
3. J. Tugendhold, 'Exter', Berlin 1922
4. 'Razryr Drizhenie, Ves' was an album to be published by the Futurist publishing house Centrifuga, but it was never realised.
5. Burliuck, Mayakovsky and Larionov frequently presented themselves in Bourgeois Public with flowers or geometric shapes painted on their faces, 1913, saw Larionov and Zdunenich's attempt to publish the manifesto 'Why we Paint Ourselves'.
6. Ibid (1) p.47



7. James Roose Evans - 'Tairov and the Synthetic Theatre'  
Experimental Theatre p.31
8. Lyre: Termed used to describe an ancient u-shaped stringed instrument.
9. R.H. Cohen p.49
10. Ibid

Popova was born in 1892 in Ivanovo near Moscow. Her family were wealthy people belonging to the cultivated bourgeoisie that travelled extensively. She was educated at the gymnasium in Yalta and later at the Arsenal gymnasium in Moscow. She had trained as a teacher before commencing her studies with Zhukovsky and the Impressionist Yash. In 1909, Popova travelled across Russia to St. Petersburg, Kiev, the ancient cities of Nizhny Novgorod, Pskov, Novgorod, Suzdal, Pereaslavl and then into Italy in 1910. Popova probably saw the works of Cezanne, Gauguin and the Impressionist tradition whilst studying with Zhukovsky and Yash, but her interest in modern painting is more likely dated from 1912 onwards when she joined Tatlin's studio. It is quite possible that it was in the same year that she was introduced to



## CHAPTER THREE

There are approximately 160 works by Liubov Popova in the George Costakis collection. Early works by Popova in the collection consist of a number of individual studies and five sketchbooks from the pre-war period. A small group of pictures dated 1906-08 reveal an instinctively sure hand and the vivid palette that was to characterize her production throughout her career. One of the sketchbooks is dated 1914, but some may represent the year from 1907-08 when Popova studied in Moscow with the painters Stanislav Zhukovsky and Konstantin Yuon. The portrait sketches and human life studies were academic exercises reflecting the conventional form of artistic discipline that existed in Moscow as it did in every other European capital during this period.

Popova was born in 1889 in Ivanovskoe near Moscow. Her family were wealthy people belonging to the cultivated bourgeois that travelled extensively. She was educated at the gymnasium in Yaita and later at the Arsenier gymnasium in Moscow. She had trained as a teacher before commencing her studies with Zhukovsky and the Impressionist Yuon. In 1909, Popova travelled across Russia to St. Petersburg, Kiev, the ancient cities of Norgorod, Pskov, Rostdv, Suzdal, Pereslave and then into Italy in 1910. Popova probably saw the works of Cezanne, Gauguin and the Impressionist tradition whilst studying with Zhukovsky and Yuon, but her interest in modern painting is more likely dated from 1912 onwards when she joined Tatlin's studio. It is quite possible that it was in the same year that she was introduced to







Sergei Shchukin's impressive collection of modern French art in Moscow. Her sketches of foliage are clearly influenced by Cezanne. At the same time Popova produced drawings of trees, some of which seem to show a definite primitivism. There is no effort to illusionism or sense of perspective. The studies contain heavy ink lines. These studies seem more in line with the work of Natalia Gonchavova and Mikhail Larionov and the 'World of Art'. The sketches showed an attempt to distill the basic structural patterns and organic rhythms of her subjects.

In 1912, Popova visited Paris with Nadizhda Udaltsova and Vera Pestal, where she studied with the Cubists Le Fauconnier and Metziner. The following year she returned to Moscow, once again working with Tatlin. She did pay another visit to Paris and Italy 1914 but returned to Moscow after the outbreak of World War I.

It was in 1913 that a marked contrast in Popova's figure studies occurred. She reduced the body to a play of open rested cones, somewhat reflecting Boccioni's development of a Bottle in Space. Popova most likely saw this piece in the Italian Futurist's Paris Exhibition in the Summer of 1913. But there is also a suggestion of Tatlin's influence in their strict structural and axial articulations which emphasise the levels of support of the body's movement. The year 1914-15 is seen as Popova's mature Cubo-Futurist period. At the beginning her paintings show her absorption of Western pictorial devices, these eventually submerge in her later more autonomous and composed style.



Fig. - 21 -

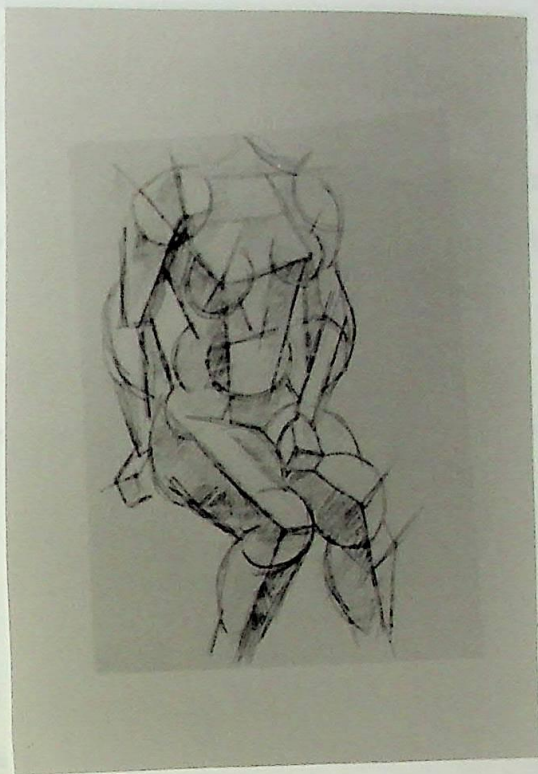


Fig. - 22 -





The distinctive European influence in her earlier work are obvious through her use of certain subject matter; colours, green and brown; random geometric volumes and her intertwining together of subject and environment through a flowing rhythmic pattern of modular forms. In her *Italian Still Life* (1914) - Popova employs collage and letters from the Roman alphabet. She uses Roman lettering in her *Portrait* and the closely linked *Philosopher*, both of 1914-15.

The First World War isolated Russian artists from the West by 1915. By this stage Popova used the cyrillic alphabet, a more vibrant palette created by native Russian art and combined wall-paper textures and patterns rather than real collage. Brisk diagonals, circular rhythms and arabesques with subtle white highlights could be found in her work.

These elements structure her painting free from the influence of subject matter and reflect Boccioni's introduction to his 1913 exhibition catalogue where he wrote:-

"One must completely forget the figure enclosed in its traditional line and, on the contrary, present it as the centre of plastic directions in space".<sup>1</sup>

The arrival of French Cubism and Italian Futurism was well timed in that the artists of all three countries were searching for the fundamentals of a new formal language. They explored means of





Fig. - 23 -



disembling traditional patterns of expression. In the Summer of 1913, Kruchenykh, founded the view that was shared by the visual artists:-

"A new content can only be obtained when we have worked out new devices, when we have worked out a new form. The new form therefore implies a new content, and thus it is the form that defines the content".<sup>2</sup>

The direction taken by both poets and painters as reflected here identifies content with formal structure, rather than subject matter. The 'breakthrough' in the visual arts occurring in the West supplied Russian artists with plastic devices for restructuring their vocabulary and syntax, despite the fact that they did not accept aspects of the French painters' practice, finding them passive and anecdotal in contrast to the active and constructive.

Popova's painting of 1914-15, *Portrait*, indicates an awareness of Tatlin's ideas, even though the piece is still figurative and does not have any three dimensional elements added to its surface. The flat black planes, conic shapes, which seem to extend from the surface and enclose space) and the transparent cones in the lower foreground suggest the basic forms as Tatlin defined them for wood, metal and glass. This piece also shows certain elements of Alexander Archipenko, (The Ukrainian Sculptor's studio Popova visited during her 1912-13 stay in Paris). It was at this time that the Ukrainian sculpture was concentrating on mixed-media, anthropomorphic constructions in



wood, metal and glass. In 1915, Popova constructed three reliefs she chose similar forms to Tatlin's and projected them from the wall however the works are different to Tatlin's counter reliefs. Popova utilized bright colours (palette) and painterly shading to define these as 'plastic paintings'. The 'paintings in relief' belong to her Cubo-Futurist phase rather than being termed as Constructivist, as Tatlin's work personified the term, that is of specific forms dictated by particular raw materials.

Popova briefly turned to Suprematism in 1916. Her work of this short period reveals a formal debt to Malevich in its open space, drifting planar forms and clear flat colour. However, suprematist theory failed to really satisfy her because Popova had become too involved in the spatial and conceptional premises of Constructivism which did not coincide with Malevich's more mystically oriented aesthetics of non-objectivity.

An irregular period of Post-Cubist abstraction followed in Popova's art. (1917-18 is the date usually given for this phase). In these paintings, some motifs can be interpreted as disjointed reflections of Cubist still lifes. The colours appear random, the highlighted areas are reminiscent of Malevich's somewhat stiffly rendered modeling in his paintings of c.1912, where it does not create volumetric form. Popova's planes cross over, but there is no strong structural logic apparent. Also, the frontal organization cylindrical and conic shapes and diagonal lines as in 'Architectonic Composition', use devices found in a number of Tatlin's counter-reliefs.



popova reached her most personal form of expression in 1918. For the next four years, her canvases, demonstrate the clearest and most consistent conception of Constructivism in painting to appear in the Soviet Union.

These pieces illustrate how Constructivism largely understood through Tatlin's ideas as a sculptural idiom which recalls and encompasses the true nature of materials, embodying painting in the theory and practice that stemmed from Tatlin's followers.

The Constructivists had adopted this title in 1921 where their first exhibition was held in the same year. The groups most renowned members worked in three dimensional form. But in the Russian idea of Faktura, a philosophy of materials that perhaps has been at the beginning of the Constructivist aesthetic, paint itself was regarded at an autonomous expressive medium.

Nikolai Tarabukin, Constructivist artist and theoretician<sup>3</sup>

'If we apply this general definition (of Construction) to painting, we must consider as elements of pictorial Construction, the material and real elements of the canvas, which is to say the paint or medium, whatever it may be, the texture, the structure of colour, the technique and other elements



unified by the composition (as a principle)  
and constituting altogether the work of art  
(as a system)'.

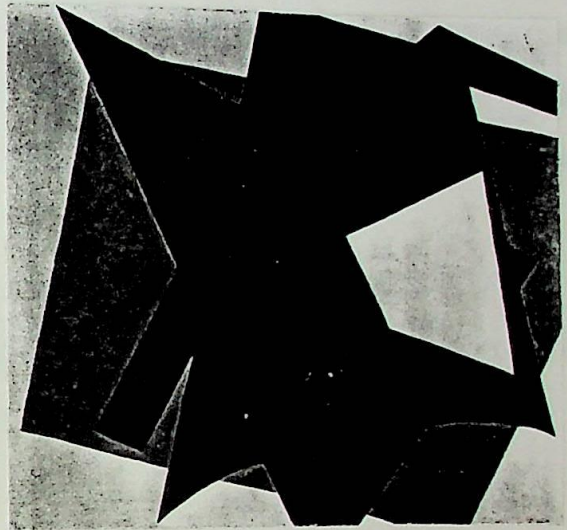
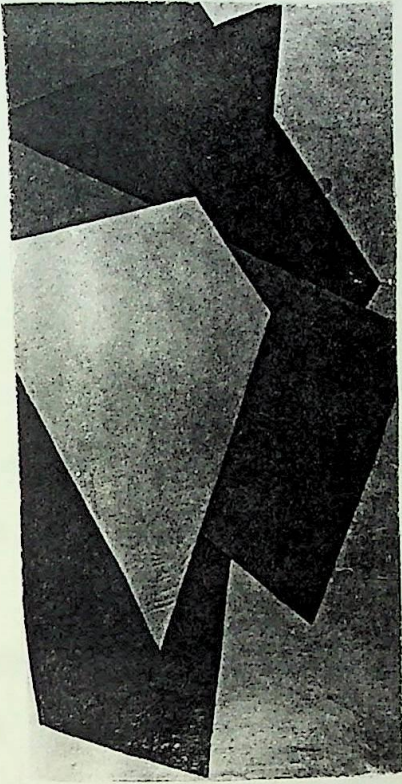
Hence, according to the principle of faktura not just only metal or wood, but the material of the paint surface itself, its thickness, glossiness, technique of application was seen as a texture or fabric (a faktura) that creates certain forms. It was thought that this essential law would alter the function and significance of the work of art. The narrative function or figuration art would be taken over by a self-contained system.

This resulted in artists such as Popova, Exter and Rodchenko stressing the qualities and potential of paint as an independent medium of expression, the vocabulary exclusive to the painting experience. They aimed to discard any references to illusion, narrative or metaphor from their work.

By 1916, Popova had acquired the pictorial notion of the plane field in space, through her association with Malevich. However, when she resumed her work at Tatlin's studio, she returned to a more materialistic idiom of painting, concentrating on colour, plane, line and texture as 'things' to be treated so as to produce dynamic compositions and new content. Whereas Malevich attempted to create an atmospheric space, Popova sought to materialize it and depict it as vigorous, tangible and intricate.

Two indicative examples of absolute spatial balance defined by Popova's use of paint are both titled *Painting Architectonics*





Figs. 24, 25



(1918-19). In both paintings, the planes do not so much overlap (a technique that suggests at least a shallow spatial depth) as interpenetrate. The small black motifs recall Malevich but they do not float. They are fixed in the single plane that sets this composition. The diagonal movements request a perspectival reading while defying it at the same time. The use of white gives rise to the ambivalent effects of transparency and reflection, Popova uses small active brushstrokes which make delicate graduations and tonal passages from one area to another.

During the Winter months of 1920-21 the principles of Constructivism and Construction were hotly debated. But Popova had been using the term 'constructive' since 1918-19<sup>4</sup>

'What is of importance now is the form or part of a form, line, colour, or texture that takes an immediate part in the painting Construction'.

In 1919 Popova wrote<sup>5</sup>

'Line as colour and as the vestige of the transverse plane is involved, and directs the forces of Construction .... Energetics a direction of volumes and planes and lines or their vestiges and all colours.

By 1921, Popova's work was occupied by linear experiments such as the spatial force Construction. Popova's loyalty to Tatlin's



creed of 'Truth to Materials' was evident in her works executed directly on wooden panels. By this point the artist viewed colour as superfluous, she limited her palette, mainly to black, white and red. Precision became part of her work, echoing to draw the circles in Spatial Force Constructions (1920-21 with a compass). The straight lines were not so precise. A smooth glossy type of paint was used to paint the linear components of the work. A denser more, amite-like paint was applied to the shaded areas. This is an ideal example of Tatlin's theory that the material controls the technique and the technique the forms. Fluid paint requires a precision tool (instrument) while the other thicker paint demands a 'dabbing' method and results in less accurate configurations. These works are more severe than her earlier paintings. There is no 'transparency', but the physical presence of paint is more aggressive as in Spatial Force Construction.

In November 1921, Popova (along with Exter and others) had announced her withdrawal from theoretical activity and 'laboratory' work with forms to devote her energies to 'production art'.

According to Chuzhak's definition the first complete expression of theatrical Constructivism was *The Magnanimous Cuckold* which opened in Moscow on 15th April 1922, produced by Meyerhold and acted on machine designed by Popova. The production was not Popova's first excursion into the theatre. She had designed the costumes for the *Tale of the Priest and his Workman Balda* at the Moscow Children's Theatre and for Runarchzrsky's play the





Fig. - 26 -



Locksmith and the Chancellor (1921) at the Korsh Theatre. Rudrutsky confirms Chuzhak's view<sup>6</sup> asserting that it was

'The first if not the only production in which the principles of scenic constructivism were consistently realised'.

Meyerhold openly acknowledged the role which Popova's machine had played in his overall handling and direction of the play, and he clearly felt that a full and real Constructivist synthesis had been achieved here between content and form.

The play, a French tragi-farce set in a mill, was written by Fernand Crommelynck. It contained absolutely no revolutionary content. As in all Crommelynck's plays passion was reduced to absurdity. The miller Bruno, obsessed with jealous doubts about his faithful wife's fidelity, insists on her accepting the advances of his friends so that he can convince himself of her infidelity rather than simply imagining it. Eventually he demands that his wife Stell accepts the offers of all the locals so that he can discover her lover. Stella at her wits end, manages to run away, escaping to content monogamy. The actors wore production clothing known as Prozodezhda. They used Popova's gymnastic apparatus to execute their bio-mechanics. Her sets referred to the windmill in the text without giving the audience any opportunity of forgetting that they were actually in a theatre and not by a windmill. The sails and wheels, one of them bearing letter's from the author's name, rotated in time with the action of the plot whirling round fast at excited



moments and slowing down at others. To facilitate the actors mechanical movements, Popova had transformed the mill into an intricate apparatus of platforms, revolving doors, ladders and scaffolding. Composed of several levels the framework looked like traditional scenery stripped of its illusionistic canvas to reveal its basic structure. As a machine for acting, Popova's Construction conveyed the urbanism of city life. The industrial urban environment was the key to progress, and this meant that Popova's machine possessed an additional ideological implication in that it referred to the attempt in real life to build the industrial basis of socialism with primitive methods.

In 1921, Tairov had commissioned Popova to design the sets and costumes for *Romeo and Juliet*, the resulting set was a complex construction of perspectural confusions and ambiguous planes defined by colour. However, Popova's set had proved so difficult to transpose into reality that Alexander Vesnin was asked to adapt her ideas into something more viable. Although the 'framework' element was present in Popova/Vesnin design for the mass festival, and despite the fact she had explored it two dimensionally in her architectonic paintings there is no proof that Popova had been involved in detailed explorations of it, conducted in three dimensions with real materials, prior to the set for *The Magnanimous Cuckold*. Her drawn design for the set was conceived two dimensionally and Popova did not make any structural or three dimensional relationship explicit. Only after the design was constructed did Popova work on it as a three dimensional structure altering the proportions as she had found them too detailed. In its final form it was therefore more the result of practical laboratory work than of abstract design activity.



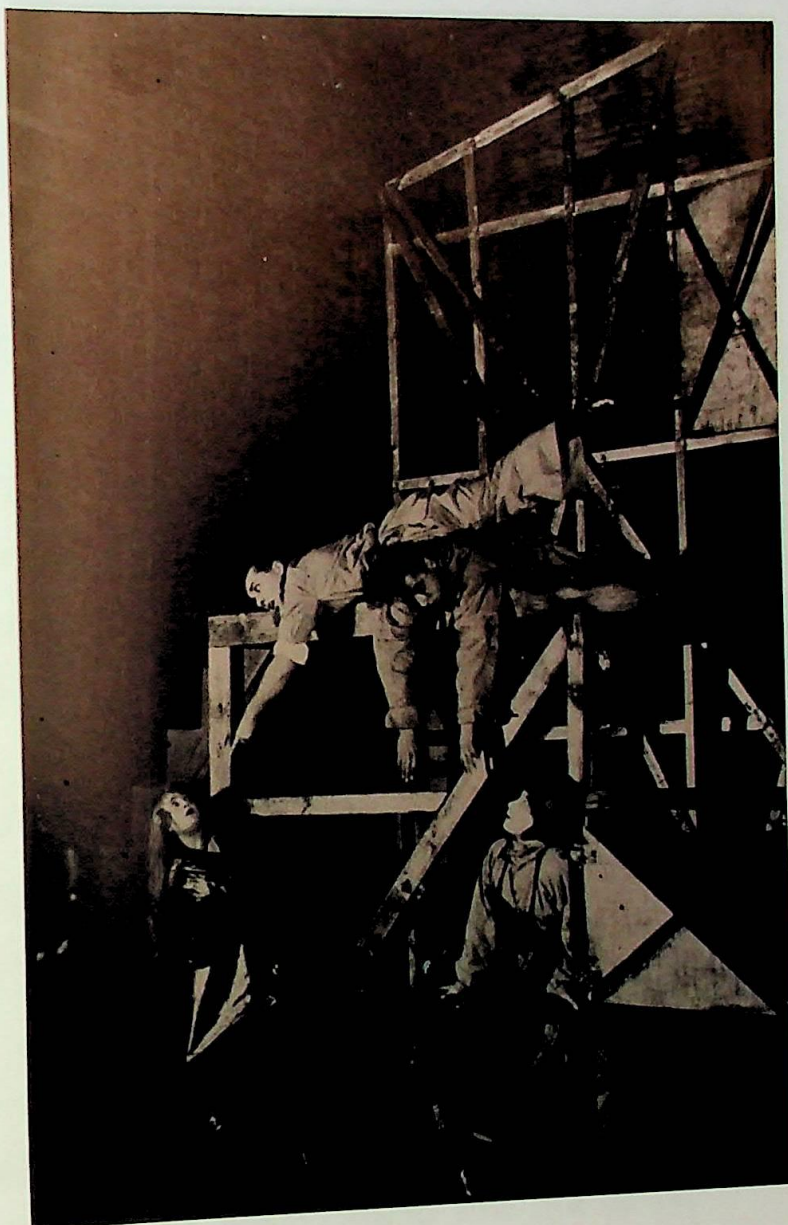


Fig. - 27 -



At the INKhUK debate on the Magnanimous Cuckold on 27 April 1922 Popova stated that her designs had been concerned

'To translate that task from the aesthetic plane onto the productivist plane.'<sup>7</sup>

She viewed this as an opportunity for the<sup>8</sup>

'Concrete definition and realization of my personal theoretical and practical professional work ... formulated as equipping a theatrical action with material elements'.

To achieve the realization of this aim Popova had set herself three tasks. One concerned Prozodezhda (work clothing), the other two concerned the set itself.

'The organisation of the material elements of the spectacle as an apparatus, a kind of installation or contrivance for the given action. In this respect utilitarian suitability must serve as the criterion, and certainly not the solution of any formal and aesthetic problems ...'

'The second task was to introduce material elements ... so as to co-ordinate the entire process of this action: to this end the



movements of the doors and window, and the rotating of the wheels were introduced into the basic score of the action, by their movements and speeds these were to underline and intensify the kinetic value of each movement of the action.'<sup>9</sup>

Popova's structure maximised the spatial potential of the whole volume in which the hypothetical 'world' of the play was built. Not surprisingly it was Popova's solution which provided the basis for the subsequent Constructivist experimentation. Popova's second Constructivist theatrical project with Meyerhold was the *Earth in Turmoil* in 1923. The play was an adaptation of *La Nuit* by Martinet, written by Sergei Tret'yakov, who was a contributor to the LEF.<sup>10</sup> Whereas props had been absent from *The Magnanimous Cuckold* there was an extensive use of props in the *Earth in Turmoil*. The props were taken from the real world, including such objects as telephones, typewriters and bicycles as well as the use of a film projector, slides and film, and a variety of lighting and sound effects. The massive wood construction which dominated the stage resembled a gantry crane. In contrast to the kinetic devices of *The Magnanimous Cuckold* its flexibility was restricted and its role in the performance less vital. It was used mainly just as an apparatus from which to hang the film screen and various agitational and revolutionary slogans such as 'We shall build a New World',<sup>11</sup>. A whole series of the slogans devised by Popova for the play; *The Earth in Turmoil*, form part of the Costakis Collection.



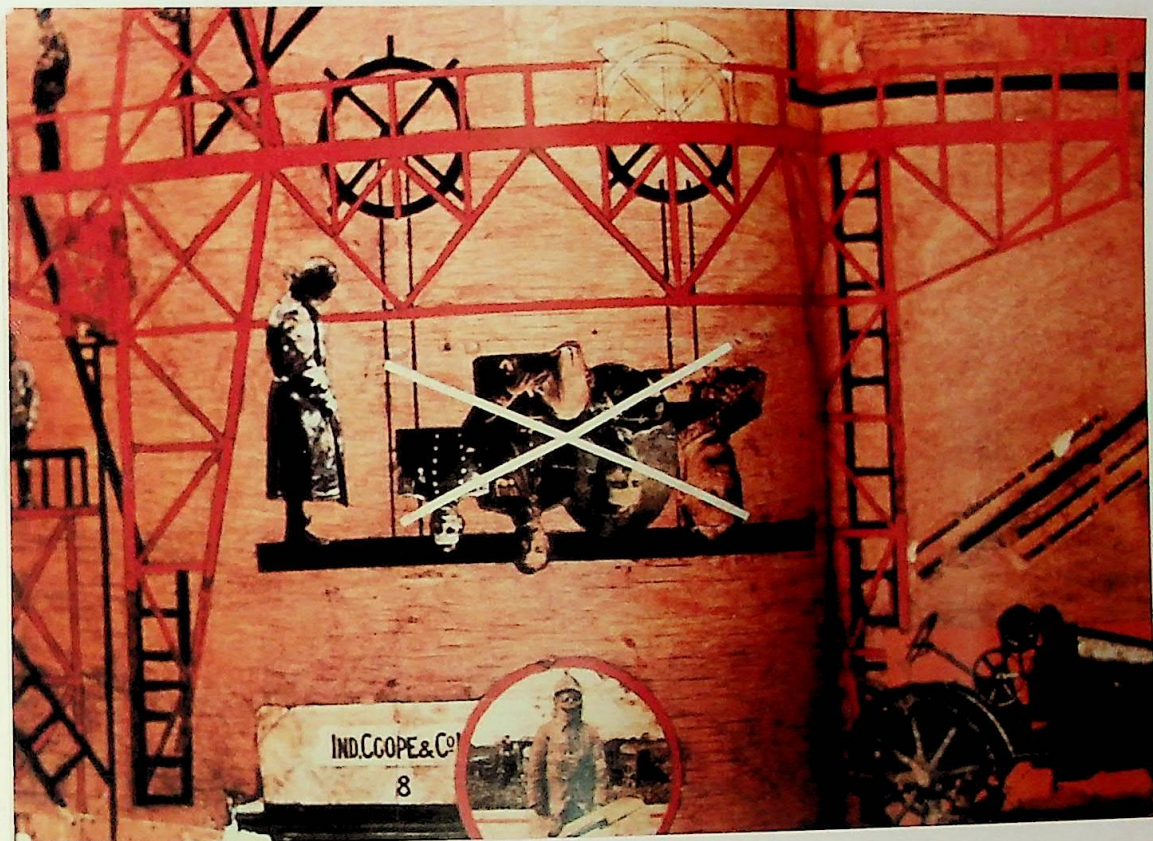


Fig. - 28 -



Despite the limited part played by the apparatus, its resemblance to a crane stressed the fact that in this example Popova was directly utilising an image taken from the world of industrial technology. Its artistic transformation was minor, a simple reduction in scale, a removal from it's rails accompanied by the retention of the wheels for mobility. In contrast to the minimum use of props in *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, Popova clarified her inclusion of products of modern technology in the *Earth in Turmoil*, in an explanatory note published in LEF.<sup>12</sup> She stated the design treatment for the play was based on a living influence and not an aesthetic influence. The props were chosen in relation to the play's plot, to create agitational commentary on the play, they served no decorative purpose.

This suggests an important change of direction in the development of Constructivism in the theatre. The apparatus in *The Magnanimous Cuckold* could not be fully identified as a particular machine instead it was an artistic synthesis and adaptation of the mechanical elements of a machine, close to an abstracted machine in resemblance. This abstract element did not exist in the *Earth in Turmoil*, where the artistic interpretation was not substituted for the mechanical, but where it was itself replaced by real mechanical objects. This suggested a revaluation of the aesthetic and what possessed aesthetic value. *The Magnanimous Cuckold* had been motivated by the idea of art (constructivism) changing life, and the essential need to transform life itself led to the idea of the artistic being a direct product of the real world of objects. Basically life was transforming art and



the concept of what was beautiful. The theatre was not providing a new direction in Constructivist activity, in the file of literature the reporting of facts was regarded as superior as an artistic ideal to 'creative writing'. The production of the *Earth in Turmoil* marked a stage in this process whereby Constructivism planning to transform the environment was itself being altered by that environment, returning to existing reality as a source of inspiration, of imagery and as a beginning for artistic work. The process of the decline of Constructivism had in fact begun. As the contemporary critic Chuzhak points out the *Earth in Turmoil* contains a whole series of compromises with the old theatre.<sup>13</sup>



## Chapter Three

1. Umberto Boccioni, Preface. 'Exposition de Sculpture Futuriste du Peintre et Sculpteur Putiviste' Boccioni, June 20-July 16, 1913
2. Alexei Kruchenykh. 'The New Paths of the World' 1913  
Translated and quoted by A.K. Nakov, Introduction in  
Edinburg, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art,  
liberated colour and form. Russian non-objective art  
1915-1922. August 10-September 10, 1978 p.11
3. Nikolai Taravukin. 'Ot Molbertv le Mastine' Translated  
into French as 'Du Chevalet a la Machine' in A.B. Nakov and  
Nikolai Taraboukin, Le Dernier Tableau, Paris 1972 p.42-43
4. Rokitin. 'Liubov Popova' From her manuscripts and notes  
in Women Artists of the Russian Avant-garde.
5. From the artists contribution to the catalogue, Moscow  
1919, p.22
6. Rezhisser 'Meyerhold', Moscow, 1969, p.261



7. L. Popova 'Vstuplenie K Diskussii Inkhuka o Velkodushnom Rogonostse' MS, a private archive Moscow. Certain section of this document have been reproduced by Rakitina, (Lyubov Popova pp 153-4) J.E. Bowlt 'From Surface to Space' The Art of Liubov Popova p 87, 1976-6. Christina Lodder, Russian Constructivism, Theatre as the Assembled Miro-Enviornment, p. 173, 1983
8. Ibid
9. Popova 'Vstruplenie'. Translation taken from Bowlt. From Surface to Space p. 87 also used in Christina Lodder Russian Constuctivism p. 174
10. LEF - Zhural Levogo Fronta Iskusstv - Journal of the Left Front of the Arts
11. A whole series of the slogans devised by Popova for the play The Earth in Turmoil form part of the Costakis Collection
12. LEF Publication No. 4 1923, p.44 Popova saw that this nre revolutionary situation required a different approach and emphasised this by using the old slogans to stress the past stage.
13. N. Chuzhak see et. Literature Fakta. Pervyisbornik Materialov Rubotnikov LEF. Moscow 1929



One of the major criticisms of Alexander Exter was that she was not fully committed to Constructivism in that her approach remained essentially decorative.<sup>1</sup> It would be naive to view this judgement as completely accurate, it is over generalized and simplified in its assessment, but what it does provide is some indication of the variations between Exter and Popova's work. The former was more lyrical in her adaptation of both Cubism and Constructivism. Yet, it is impossible to compare Exter and Popova's set and costume designs without bearing in mind their working relationships with Tairov and Meyerhold. Both directors were also somewhat diverse from each other in their concepts of the theatre production.

In Tairov's theatre a play was in essence a highly aesthetic affair in which the director controlled the mood of his audience by uniting effects of gesture, dramatic action, lighting, costume and stage sets altogether. According to Tairov, this expressed what he called 'The scenic atmosphere' of the play. It was an attitude dependent on aesthetic effect, a direct heir of the Symbolists and of Wagner. In this respect, it is surprising that the Constructivist Exter ever became involved in Tairov's Chamber Theatre, but it still represented a change in direction away from the ivory tower of art for art's sake. Movements were formalized



and no more naturalistic than the sets. The director remained the unifying and pre-dominant influence. However, Meyerhold was the director who became most dedicated to strictly Constructivist principles. He also abandoned the naturalistic stage, but in many ways Meyerhold was the antithesis of Tairov as a director. Although they shared the belief in the dominance of the director over his actors and designers, Meyerhold was more committed to a stage without illusion than was Tairov. The action was carried out without the aid of footlights, which tended to create a separation between the world of actors, well illuminated, and that of the audience in semi-darkness. Like Meyerhold, Popova adhered to the rigid rules of Constructivism, with no room for suspended belief in her stage designs she proved to be more austere and principled in her theatrical work than was Exter. In Popova's economy of means and her severity of organisation make Exter seem almost flamboyant in comparison. There is little evidence of Exter having worked with Meyerhold but this is not to say that Popova had no professional links with Tairov. In 1921, Popova worked on sets and costumes for the Kamerny's production of Romeo and Juliet. However, her non-sequential planes of colour and illogical deflections of light, transposed into an illusionistic setting with stairs and vaulted ceilings, created an awkward and unacceptable contradiction. Fortunately, all was not lost, Popova's friend Alexander Vesnin, the architect, took the designs, altered them, simplifying them into so much more coherent ensemble, which was then used by Tairov in his production of May, 1921. Exter had designed the costumes for the same



production of *Romeo and Juliet* and much of Tairov's mise-en scene such as the balcony scene and the tragedy's finale, was pictorially beautiful although there was (according to Rudnitsky<sup>2</sup>) too much Art-Nouveau style mannerisms.<sup>3</sup> But the tragic tension of the enmity between the two families, due to Tairov's desire for the crowd scenes to look festive and picturesque. Exter had also contributed to the designing of the sets, which appeared light and vivid in her sketches. Capturing the spirit of Renaissance and a contemporary style, when constructed the sets were heavy and stylized. Although this production received critical acclaim, it was not successful with the public. Exter stopped practical work in the theatre from that time. Her place in the Kamerny theatre was taken by the Stenberg brothers.

Mayerkovsky ridiculed what he called 'Sweet Futurism' for ladies referring to the Kamerny theatre, his sarcastic remarks aimed at Exter.<sup>4</sup> In 1930 she published her theatrical designs which were elegant like embroideries of subtle variations on the Constructivist theme, because most of them were designed with no specific work in mind. Then it seemed as though Constructivism possessed a new virtuosity and was entering the realm of the decorative arts.

Exter's concentration on the rhythmic organization of space, had anticipated her Constructivist theatre, her dress designs, her marionettes and above all, her costume designs for the film *Aelita* (1924). Both Exter and Popova as 'productivists' became involved in not only costume designing for the stage but also for



the textile industry. The patterns that Popova designed consisted of rigorous combinations of Euclidean geometric forms. Observing a rigid economy of artistic means, as she had in theatrical work, each design exploited the potential of one or two such forms in combination with an equally limited colour range of one or two colours with black and white. Through the repetition and equal development of these simple elements quite intricate patterns were produced. For example, in one design Popova introduced a shift in pattern, a 'sdvig' a break-up of the rhythm. Such designs relied on the experiments with structure, colour and interpenetrating planes which Popova had carried out in her architecture paintings. Popova went on to design clothes that would utilise these readily reproducible, geometrical patterns. These were simple garments, blouses and skirts, but with a conscious elegance, which hardly fulfilled the strictly functional criteria which had been set up for prozodazhda, as used in *The Magnanimous Cuckold*. This deviation from defined objectives was evidence of how Constructivist practice was having to modify under the influence of the transitional period in which it was working out its ideas (during the INKhUK debates of 1921).

All the prozodazhda designs utilised plain, unpatterned material which did not obscure but provided a clear expression to the structure and form of the clothing.





Fig. - 29 -





Fig. - 30 -



The extents to which Popova succeeded in achieving some genuine interaction and balance between her new aesthetic and the other factors in design, is well illustrated by comparing her work with Exter, in which geometrical ornament dominated all other concerns. Exter's theoretical statements concerning rational clothing design for mass production did utilise many of the principles also put forward by Popova (and Stepanova). Both artists stressed the need for clothing to possess certain qualities:-<sup>5</sup>

'Appropriateness, hygiene, psychology and harmony of proportions with the human body'.

It had to be suitable for the workers and the type of work that would be conducted in this clothing. Of course, this did not necessarily apply to their costume designs for the stage. Considerations of function were united with explorations into the material components of clothing. Exter sought to correlate form with material and came to the conclusion that certain materials, wool for example, were suitable for a<sup>6</sup>

'form compared of right angles ... without any unnecessary additional vertical rhythm of folds ..... Soft, wide materials make it possible to do more complex and varied silhouettes for clothes ..... elastic materials ..... make it possible to make clothing for movement (dancing) and the working out of more complicated forms (circles polygrams etc.)



Following these principles Exter designed garments which would fulfil a number of purposes, reverting to the different types of activities in the routines of everyday life. Clothing would serve as a walking outfit, dress for special occasions, and a working outfit, means of simple alterations to the overall outfit. However, Exter certainly never discarded the concerns of elegance and beauty 'per se'. Even in her work for mass production she employed decorative devices and stressed that<sup>7</sup>

'Clothing for mass use must consist of simplest geometrical forms such as the rectangle, square, triangle'

Rhythm and variety in the content of these forms would be catered for through colour. In many ways this explains why aesthetic factors dominate her creations for the Studio of Fashion (Atel'e mod) and her costume designs for Aelita. In both these areas of her work, strict utility played no role and Exter's use of geometrical forms as decorative elements stressed the painterly nature of her approach to clothes. Christina Lodder, (Russian Constructivism) dismisses Exter's costume for Aelita as more reminiscent of Art Nouveau than Constructivism, and her servant's trousers constructed of rectangular metallic stripes, appeared to be designed to prevent rather than accommodate movement. Lodder writes<sup>8</sup>



"It is significant that whereas Stepanova and Popova used the theatre to realise *prozodezdha* Exter produced these decorative fripperies - a difference which was fundamental in their approach".

The costumes for *Aelita* were quite remarkable but were removed from the concerns with practicality found in Popova's 'overall' or 'boiler suit' type costume designs. But then again, *Aelita* was based on Tolstoi's fantastic story of men from Mars and proletarians from Earth, this dictated an imaginative and 'unreal' scenario. It is accurate to claim that Exter costumes looked rather absurd in her sketches but were appropriate with regards to the overall context of the medium, film in this case. This supplied Exter with a high degree of momentum, she depended on the cinematic method to 'move' the characters and provided the viewer with several successive points of view. In turn, the cinema supplied Exter with an additional or artificial space - this was one reason why Meyerhold was to become so intrigued by moving pictures. The bizarre designs of the costumes, their asymmetrics and mechanical attributes, were appropriate to the everchanging space in which they functioned. There were very diverse from the exhuberance of her pieces for *Romeo and Juliet* and in certain ways, containing something of the simplicity and severity of Alexander Vesnin's costumes for *Phedre* (1922). Due to the restrictions of the black and white film, Exter turned to other systems of formal definition, as colour in her pieces would be



wasted. This, along with her strong interest in space as a creative means, encouraged Exter to employ a selection of unusual materials in the construction of the costumes, and to depend on definite contrasts between material textures - aluminium, perspex, glass and metal-foil. Such 'industrial' materials of course were part of the Constructivists, cult of the machine, and not totally divorced from the machines found in Popova's designs. In Popova's constructions, they were applied with a real utilitarian purpose. But with *Aelita*, both in Exter's costumes and Rabinovich's sets, industrial materials served a definite objective. In the absence of colour, they defined form. Their transparency and reflectivity joined with the space around them and created in eccentric montage of forms.

The turning point in Popova's career as a stage designer was undoubtedly after her participation in the 'conclusive' leftist exhibition  $5 \times 5 = 25$ , where she had encountered Meyerhold in 1921. Meyerhold had invited her to develop a programme for a course in 'material stage design' at his Stage Higher Producer Workshops in Moscow. Of course, it was here that Popova had created her extraordinary construction and costumes for *The Magnanimous Cuckold*. Popova's ideas for the production were influenced by artists already active in the workshop, including Sergei Eisenstein. Unlike Exter, Popova's reliance on colour was minimal. The combined elements of line, shape, movement and above all function were the ingredients used to produce her 'windmill' like installation.



The Constructions of Popova and Stepanova were followed by several distinguished experiments. Vesnin's unusual mechanisms for Tairov's production of Chesterton's *The Man Who was Thursday*, in December 1923, found their basic source of inspiration in Popova's 'windmill', despite the fact that they were largely representational and supposedly transmitted the reality of the big city through their elevators and billboards. But it was decidedly the Stenberg brothers, Georgii and Vladimir, who maintained the purest traditions of Constructivism on stage. Although they worked mostly for Tairov and hence, in theory, were more associated with the intimate and psychological direction of the Kamerny theatre, their combined sets (with Medunetsky) for *The Storm of Mardi*, 1924, had more in common with Popova, than with Exter. On stage, a deliberately unyielding, vaulted construction was built from squared beamed which conveyed the heaviness of the patriarchal order of life gloomily hanging over the characters' heads and contrary to tradition, uprooted the drama from the countryside and enclosed it in restrictive, beamed cages. Evidently this owes far more to the framework of Popova's austere structure in *The Magnanimous Cuckold* than it did to the lyrical lines and colours found in Exter's designs for *Romeo and Juliet*. Like Meyerhold and Popova, the Stenbergs regarded the actor and not the text as the pivotal element of theatre and guaranteed a maximum of movement by using multi-level constructions, ladders, inclines etc. Thus the actors were enabled to function in a number of positions and to relate to each other and to the spectators vertically, horizontally and diagonally. Tairov and



Exter were also to instigate these essential elements in their theatre, but they were more influenced by the text than either Meyerhold/Popova or the Stenbergs.

The Stenberg's costume designs were, however, less satisfactory and in *The Storm* their narrative quality clashed with the abstract sets. A number of observers noted this fault, Lunacharsky commented<sup>9</sup>

'The Storm was presented as a strange mixture of completely realistic performance and rather artificial, Constructive decor'.

In future productions, the Stenbergs were to follow a more logical progression, often achieving an effective synthesis of designs as in Tairov's staging of Shaw's *St. Joan* (1924). Unfortunately the later productions were full of narrative quality in the Stenberg's designs, these in turn reflected the taste of the time. By the late 1920's Soviet stage design was returning from Construction to decoration, from space to surface. The few exceptions, such as Mayakovsky's *Beg Bug*, produced by Meyerhold with costumes by Rodchenko (1929), did not stop the regression towards the classical tradition. Soviet stage designers brought the beautiful prospects of a utopian socialism into the 'bella prospettiva' of the theatrical decor.<sup>10</sup>



Fig. - 31 -



Fig. - 32 -



## FOOTNOTES

## Chapter Four

- 1 Christina Lodder. Notes A Biographical Sketch on Exter. Russian Constructivism p. 242
- 2 Konstantin Rudintsky. 'Romeo and Juliet'; Russian and Soviet Theatre. Tradition and the Avant-garde p. 169, 1988
- 3 Art Nouveau was a decorative style flourishing in most of Western Europe and the U.S.A. from about 1890 to World War I. It resulted in a conscious effort to create a new style in reaction to the academic 'historicism' of much 19th Century art. Its most characteristic theme being the use of sinuous asymmetrical lines based on plant forms. Primarily an art of ornament, it's most typical manifestations occurred in the practical and applied arts.
- 4 Denis Bablet. 'The Soviet Union of the Twenties' - Revolutions in Stage Design of the XXth Century, p. 113 1977
- 5 A. Exter, 'V. Konstruktiunoi Adezhde' - Atele - No. 1, 1923 pp 4-5



6 Ibid

7 A. Exter. 'Prototai Pvaktichnost V. Odezhde' p. 31

8 Christina Lodder. 'The Object and the Constructivist Micro-Environment', Russian Constructivism, p. 155, 1983

9 A. Lunachavsky. 'K. Desiatiletelu Kamernogo Teatra'. In Iskusstvo Tradioshchimsie, Moscow, 1924, No. 4-5 p. 5

Used in John E. Bowlt, Stage Designs and the Russian Avant-garde, p. 13

10 Ibid



After *Famira Kifared* and *Salome*, Exter's style of three-dimensional constructed sets and costumes influenced the emerging Soviet theatre. Alexander Vesnin, Mikhail Andreenko and Isaak Robinovich were among the artists working for the theatre who applied her ideas to their designs of the 1920's. The first international tour of the Kamerny theatre, in 1923, also introduced her work to the French, Germans and Italians. Responses differed from ecstatic enthusiasm to direct hostility. While Leger applauded what he saw as the Kamerny's

'Precise, exact and clear Constructive art',<sup>1</sup>

and second generation Italian Futurists such as Vinicio Paladini and Enrico Prampolini adapted Exter's style in their theatre designs, some critics were unimpressed by the Kamerny and condemned it as 'Art Bolshevism'. The fear that the Kamerny theatre created was involved with the role of the modern theatre. But it was not just Exter and the Kamerny theatre that caused a sense of uneasiness within the world of modern theatre, but it was also Popova's utilitarian constructions and Meyerhold's bio-mechanics. For what they offered, in a theatrical, larger-than-life version, were the very characteristics of modern urban life in the 1920's - speed, fragmentation, endless aggression - these were exciting and intimidating at the same time, because they were new.



In theory the Constructivist designed object was devoid of external, a priori factors of style. Derived from the scientific study of objective criteria it represented a completely impersonalized utilitarian product. However, when the actual 'set and costume' products of this design process are examined particular visual characteristics are found to be common. These visual similarities suggest that Constructivism involved its own formal language amounting to a style, and in a condition which it had to carry out the Constructivist 'design method', this frequently included, in practice, the employment of these formal features as a pre-established vocabulary. The Constructivist method of arranging form became illustrated in skeletal angular structures in economy of line and material, its over simplicity and a 'geometric' answer to surface arrangements. Although Exter and Popova adapted this vocabulary to varying degrees both utilised the fundamentals of the formal language of Constructivism

The problem and consequences of this development was that the features of objects produced by the 'Constructivist' system could be used entirely without reference to the genuine method that had originally generated them. Constructivism had strongly stated its rejection of the concept of 'decoration' and at the same time any fixity of form. The trends that emerged during and just after Exter and Popova's time (early 1920) were antithetical to the essence of Constructivism itself, in that they reduced the Constructivist method to a set of rules which could be



administered mechanically to decorative tasks and surface solutions instead of a system for the arrangements of material guided by the principles of tectonics, faktura and construction. 102

The major difference between Exter and Popova was that Exter never fully let go of the elements of 'decoration' in her work whereas Popova completely abandoned the use of unnecessary 'extras' viewing them as 'compromises' with the aesthetic tradition.

Nevertheless considering the uncompromising and technologically unfavourable environment within which these painter/designers worked, their achievements were exceptional.

What both artists shared was a desire to translate the pictorial surfaces of their canvases into the sculptural reality of the theatrical production. Both equally talented, each chose to direct their individual ideas and energy into somewhat opposing channels within the Avant-garde Russian theatre; but still 'Constructivism' was the pre-dominant influence shared by Exter and Popova, on their route from the painting studio to the stage production.



## Footnote

- 1 R.H. Cohen, Article on Exter, Art Forum, Summer 1981, p 49



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

## BOOKS

Bablet, Denis

Revolutions in Stage Designs of the XXth Century.Leon Amiel Publishers  
Paris/New York, 1977.Barron, Stephine  
Tuckman, MauriceThe Avant-Garde in Russia 1910-1930  
(New Perspective)Los Angeles County Museum of Art,  
U.S.A. 1980Battock, Gregory  
Nichas, RobertThe Art of Performance

New York, E.P. Dutton Inc., 1984

Bowlit, John E.

Stage Designs and the Russian Avant-  
Garde - (1911-1929)  
International Exhibitions Foundation  
U.S.A. 1976-1978

Bowlit, John E.

The Silver Age, Russian Art of the  
Early Twentieth Century and "World  
of Art" Group  
Oriental Research Partners, U.S.A.  
1982

Bowlit, John E.

Russian Art of the Avant-Garde :  
Theory and Criticism 1902-1934  
Thames and Hudson, New York 1988

Braun, Edward

The Theatre of Meyerhold  
Eyre Methuen, London 1979

Elliot, David

New World's - Russian Art and  
Society (1900-1937)  
Thames and Hudson Ltd., London 1988

Fauchereau, Serge

Moscow (1900-1930)  
Rizzoli International Publications,  
Inc., New York, 1988



Gan, Alexei

Constructivism  
Tver, 1922

Gibian, George

Russian Modernism, Culture and the Avant-Garde (1900-1930)  
Cornell University Press, London 1976

Gray, Camilla

The Russian Experiment in Art (1863-1922)  
Revised and enlarged edition by Marian-Burleigh-Molley.  
Thames and Hudson Ltd., London 1986

Guerman, Mikhail  
(Introduction)

Soviet Art of the 20's and 30's  
Abrams, New York, 1988

Hunt, Hugh

The Live Theatre  
Oxford University Press, London 1962

Lodder, Christina

Russian Constructivism  
Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1983

Markov, Vladimir

Russian Futurism  
MacGibbon and Kee Ltd., London 1969

Milner, John

Vladimir Tatlin and the Russian Avant-Garde  
New Haven, Yale University Press, U.S.A. 1983

Milner, John

Russian Revolutionary Art  
Bloomsbury Books, Godgrey Cave and Associates Ltd., London 1987

Nakov, Andrei B.

Russian Pioneers: At the Origins of Non-Objective Art  
Annely Juda Fine Art, London 1976  
(Exhibition Catalogue)

Nakov, Andrei B.  
(Donald Denslager)

Artist of the Theatre, Alexander Exter (Collection of Four Essays)  
The New York Public Library, N.Y.  
Spring - Summer, 1974

Roose-Evans, James

Experimental Theatre  
From Stanislavsky to Peter Brook.  
Routledge and Kegan Paul.  
Revised Edition, London 1984



Rowell, Margit  
Zander, Rudenstine,  
Angelica

Art of the Avant-Garde in Russia  
Selections from the George Castakis  
Collection  
The Solomon R. Guggenheim  
Foundation, New York, 1981

Rudnitsky, Konstantin

Russian and Soviet Theatre  
Tradition and the Avant-Garde  
Thames and Hudson Ltd., London 1988

Tairov, Alexander

Zapiski Rexhissera  
(Notes of a Director) Moscow 1921,  
English translation in Nikolai  
Taraboukine le Dernier Tableau  
(Ed. Andrei B. Nakov, Paris 1972)



## ARTICLES

Cohen, Ronny H. 'Alexandra Exter's Designs for the Theatre' Artforum, Summer 1981, Artforum, International Magazines Inc. 1981. Publisher Anthony Korner, pp 46-49.

Exhibition Catalogue 'Art in Revolution' Bonet Art and Design since 1917, Arts Council of Great Britain, London 1971.

Exhibition Catalogue 'Constructivism' Council of Europe, Berlin 1977

Ex. Libris 6: 'Constructivism and Futurism'. Russian and Others, T.J. Art Inc., New York 1977

Exter, A. 'Vkonstruktivnoi Odezde' Atel'e No. 7, 1923, pp 4-5 (Translation in Lodder, C., Russian Constructivism p.155)

Popova, L., 'L Vstruplenie K. Diskussi, INKhUK Velikodushnom Vagonoste' paper delivered at INKhUK, 27, April 1922, Translation in Bowlt, J.E. 'From Surface to Space', 'The Art of Liubov Popova' Structurist, No. 15/16, 1975-76, pp 80-8.

Rakitina, (Rokitin) E. 'Lyubov Popova' Isskusstvo i Manifesty Khudozhnit i z vital No. 617, 1924, pp 76-7 Translation found in Women Artists of the Russian Avant-Garde - Rokitin.

Tugendhold, Y. 'Alexandra Exter', 'Sarja' edition, Berlin, 1922, p 30. Editions in German, Russian and English.